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ROBIN.

BY

MRS. PARR,

AUTHOR OF

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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ROBIN.

CHAPTER I.

THE fierce sun of August had all day long held Venice in its close embrace; but now that five o'clock had struck, the piazza, which during the mid-day heat had been deserted, began to show signs of life again.

'Between the columns,' spot of evil omen, two Englishmen were standing bidding each other good-bye. One—on his

way to Padua—was leaving by the evening train; the other—after the fashion of birds who while on the wing stay their flight—was stopping at Venice.

That morning neither had ever seen or spoken to the other, but the casual mention of Dr. North's name had set Mr. Veriker thinking, and ridding himself of his daughter by sending her to the Lido, he had hurried off to the Hôtel Luna, and asked the favour of an interview with the great London physician.

His request was granted, the two had since spent the remainder of the day together, and now they were parting like old friends.

'I cannot thank you half enough for the kindness you have done me,' Mr. Veriker was saying.

'But no, don't speak of it in that way.

I only wish I had had something more pleasant to say to you. Unhappily,' and oh, what popularity that sigh and sympathetic shake of the head had gained him! 'it is the misfortune of doctors to give people unpalatable things to swallow.'

'Truths are for the most part apt to be unpalatable.'

'Perhaps so; and yet to my mind it is always best to know the truth. The thing does not happen one whit the sooner because some one has said that some day it must come to pass. Besides,' laying his hand encouragingly on his companion's shoulder, 'we are not infallible; doctors differ.'

'And patients die.'

'Ah! that end comes to all of us; to me as well as to you. Many whom I have warned will be taking my physic long after I am under ground. So remember; live

carefully, avoid excitement, and we shall meet in London.'

He walked away. Mr. Veriker watched him out of sight; then turning round, he mechanically bent his steps towards the starting-place of those little 'black steam-tugs,' which, to the great scandal of Mr. Ruskin, convey the people of Venice to the Lido.

'You may die any day.' The words, without any especial meaning for him, kept repeating themselves in Mr. Veriker's ears. 'Die any day'—die—lie dead, stretched motionless and mute, while all the busy world went on around.

The host of speculations which followed this thought arrested Mr. Veriker's steps. Unconsciously he stopped short, leaned his elbows on a bit of rail which ran near, and threaded the mazes of a life of fifty years,

while gazing down into the water which flowed below: seeing a boy—fruit of an ill-assorted marriage—neglected, uncared for, with a father grown old and selfish, and a mother too young and thoughtless to take trouble in shaping a nature which only needed love to guide its course aright; seeing a youth, headstrong, impatient, refusing all control from those who he knew had prophesied that their advice would be thrown away; seeing a man after thirty years of life—spent no matter how—trying to start afresh, for the reason that on him was fixed the faith and trust of one whose love could see no failure.

Alas! how many stumbles he had made which that dear heart had shut her eyes to—and his own, growing dim, obscured the rest of the sad picture, for all too soon Death had claimed her for his own, and the

husband, and the child that she had borne him, had had to learn to live without her.—Yes; she had died.

Surely, in all the years that had passed since then, never had Mr. Veriker seen his wife so bodily—the magic power of memory brought before him the room, its furniture, with all those dread accessories by which death is made more terrible.

'Good God!' standing erect, he made a gasp for breath, for in that momentary vision the lighted candles, the heavy perfumed flowers, the leaden weight of that o'erspreading sheet had seemed to stifle him, and sighing audibly he took off his hat so that the little seaward-wafted breeze might fan him more readily; then knitting himself together by a movement which seemed to assert the power of motion, he walked towards the steamboat with a quick

step as if to outstride the shadow which stalked behind him.

That reverie of his had eaten into more time than he had an idea of—it had made a good hole in an hour—and seven o'clock struck as he passed through the bathing establishment on to the balcony in search of his daughter.

On an evening such as this, one was sure to find a crowd assembled here; and Mr. Veriker's eyes ran over the heads of those seated at the numerous little tables, to skirt the railing, over and against which a line of people stood lounging.

'Ah!' His face told that he had found what he sought, that his eyes were resting upon those they had been looking for. Mr. Veriker was a singularly handsome man, and the pause he had made had attracted the notice of a party of diners, who smiled

significantly as they saw him suddenly walk straight across to an opposite point, and by a rather brusque movement place himself between a young man and a girl, who were thus separated.

'And what may you two people be talking about together, eh?'

His eyes, which had rapidly scanned both faces, while his elbows widened the distance between them, now plunged themselves into the sea.

'Why, papa, it's you. I was just going to fire up at the rude monster,' and she snuggled herself up against him, 'who had pushed himself in between us two; and look at Jack's face—isn't it red? that will tell you what he intended to do.'

'I expected to find you wondering what had become of me.'

Mr. Veriker's voice sounded as unusually

stern as his manner was unusually odd. But his daughter, accustomed only to the perfect good-fellowship which reigned between them, set this down to the probable worry of the business engagement for which her father had left her.

'I *was* wondering,' she said. 'I came out of the water very early indeed, and I could not think what had become of you.'

'I had no idea myself that I should be kept until seven o'clock.'

'Seven o'clock! Was that seven that struck? Why, I thought it was five—didn't you? did you think it was seven, Jack?'

'Not until I heard the clock, I didn't.'

'Just fancy that! We're a nice pair together, aren't we? Papa, what do you think?'

'Think, my dear? That I wish you

wouldn't call our friend here Jack. You know, you are growing up—you're getting quite a woman now, and there are some things that'll have to be left off: that are not quite in keeping—are they?' and though he did not raise his eyes, his head slightly turned towards the young man in question.

'Really, I have never given the matter any consideration'—the answer came a little stiffly. 'I don't quite remember how it happened, but it would seem as strange for her now not to call me Jack, as if I didn't call her Robin.'

There was a few minutes' pause, broken at length by the anxious inquiry of:

'Don't you feel well, papa?'

'*Well*, my dear! Certainly I feel well—what should make you ask such a question?'

Mr. Veriker no longer lounged, but drew himself up into an erect position.

'Oh, I know! You want your dinner, I'm starving, and so is Ja——' She drew back at the end of the name, made a dumb show of swallowing it down, and then, with a look of mimic pleading to her father, said: 'You really must let me off, papa; I can't call him Mr. Dorian, not while he looks as he does now.'

'I don't see anything at all particular in his look now.'

'Don't you? but I fancy there is though, and about my look too, by the way people have been staring at us.'

'Staring at you, if you like,' put in Jack by way of mending matters.

'At me! well, I don't see there is more to look at in me than in you. This dress has got a little bit skimpy, perhaps,' and by the movement she made she tried to lengthen it down; 'and the water hasn't improved the

colour of my hat, but the shape is all right,' and having taken it off, she surveyed it critically, 'perfectly,' placing it on again. 'So there.'

The eyes of both men turned upon her. Jack Dorian smiled; Mr. Veriker's face twitched.

'Why do you go about dressed like this, Robin?' he said. 'You ought to have some new clothes.'

'But I shall be delighted to have some new clothes, if you can find any money to pay for them; and if there is anything to spare, perhaps you'll be generous to Jack, and then I may find it possible to call him *Mr. Dorian.*'

Jack rubbed his hand over his coat, and fell to examining it about the elbows.

'I can't think how it is the confounded things wear out as they do. I'm sure they

used to last much longer,' he said. 'Upon my life, though, I didn't know I was quite so seedy-looking as I am.'

'My dear fellow, we're all in about the same condition,' and Mr. Veriker cast a rueful eye upon his own garments.

'And what if we are?' and Robin drew herself up. 'We're by long odds the best-looking people here. As for you, daddy, you're the handsomest man in all the world, everybody knows that—and this afternoon some one told me,' and she threw a mischievous look towards Jack, 'that there was not another girl in the place half as good-looking as I am; so it's hard if we two can't manage to pass off a bad third between us.'

Jack's face had got rather red, but already—pretending to descry in the distance her most devoted waiter—Robin was off, and

the two men were left together alone. Mr. Veriker gave a shake of his head.

'You shouldn't put such thoughts into her head,' he said; 'girls find out things of that sort far too soon.'

'But you know that I would not say a word to her that I thought you would not approve of. You may trust me for that.'

'My dear fellow, I *have* trusted you already.'

'And I have in no way abused your trust.'

'No, I don't believe you have. God grant that I have not abused my own; but it's a difficult task for an idle man like me to have the entire guidance of a young girl like Robin. I did not feel it when she was a child; but now—when—oh, the thing won't bear a thought! Come along,' hurrying off, 'let's look after our dinner; perhaps

that will drive the blues away. Somehow I've got a fit of them on me to-day that I can't get rid of.'

But though the dinner was a marvel in the art of discreet ordering, Mr. Veriker, impatient to be seated, had no appetite to partake of it. Jack, with forethought, for which a look from Robin blessed him, feigned it impossible to get on unless they had a little better wine ; but the wine there, Mr. Veriker drank but a small share of it.'

'No,' he said, 'it's only that the sun has been hot, and that heat tries me now. I thought I should be all right this evening when I got out here, but somehow I can't rise to the occasion.'

'Don't let us stop here any longer: let's go back and sit in the piazza. The band will be playing, and we could have some ices.'

'That doesn't sound half bad, does it, Robin?'

'It is the very thing I was wishing for.'

All that her father desired, and lately much that Jack Dorian had wanted to do, was safe to be the very thing Robin was wishing for. Hers was that woman-nature whose pleasure comes from those she loves being pleased.

Accustomed by the habits of their wandering life to make many friends, not one among them had ever been what Jack Dorian was to her. Their acquaintance had commenced at Nice some three winters before, when Robin, looked on as a child by the men who visited her father, had been singled out by Jack to tease, to pet, to romp with. Small for her age, she was then fourteen; she had so grown since, that now at seventeen she was quite a woman; and

some weeks before, with thoughts of this kind floating in her mind, Robin had taken from beneath her chin a flower which Jack had given her to fasten there, and holding it in her hand, had fixed her eyes on it, bringing it nearer and nearer to her lips, until for an instant it lay pressed against them, then, with a sudden glow which sent the colour mounting up from cheek to brow, she threw it out of the open window, and, turning, quickly ran away, still blushing at she knew not what.

The memory of this little action gave her manner when next they met a half-shy consciousness, with just that suspicion of embarrassment a lover is so proud to seize upon. Not that Jack had any thought of being Robin's lover—at least the notion had not come to him until the moment when her coy glance sent a sudden thrill which

set his heart beating, and shot from out his eyes a fire which Robin's lids drooped under.

Since that day, children playing with edged tools the two had been; Robin by turns silent, elated, shy, defiant; Jack—it is difficult to analyse what Jack felt; he was twenty-five, and imagined that he had had a good experience in the tender passion. What then was this sudden feeling that he had for Robin? not love—that is if he had ever known love before; not friendship—he could not deceive himself so far as that. Was it brotherly affection, sympathy, compassion perhaps? Yes, all of these, and with them all a something so far beyond, that it outstripped the rest and left him doubtful as before.

CHAPTER II.

MIDNIGHT had struck, and Mr. Veriker, who at ten o'clock had declared himself too tired to remain out any longer, was still up and abroad.

At the door of the hotel—to Robin's surprise—instead of going in with her, he proposed taking a turn in Jack Dorian's company. He would 'have a cigar,' he said—he had not wanted one before, he had been fidgeting to get home; now that he was there, he felt it was useless going to

bed—he should not sleep. Perhaps a smoke might help him.

'He isn't himself,' thought Jack, as they strolled through the Merceria in the direction of the Rialto; 'something has gone wrong with him;' and jumping at the conclusion that this something must be money, he ran over his resources with a view of rendering any help that was in his power. It did not strike him that this generosity towards a man who had no claim upon him was very foreign to his nature; the desire to assist Mr. Veriker was so spontaneous, that it seemed to take the shape of a necessity, and Jack was all anxiety to learn the extent of the demand.

Knowing by experience how difficult it is to make the first plunge, he was prepared for some preamble; and, though he did not quite see how the bush was to be beaten

round by entering upon a dissertation upon Venice, its past glory and its present decay, he did his part of listener with a manly grace. But when an hour had gone, the whole time of which had been spent in walking, and they were back again on the Riva dei Schiavoni with the subject no nearer than it had seemed at starting, Jack's patience began to give way. What did it mean? Had he made a mistake? Did Mr. Veriker tell nothing because he had nothing to tell? If so, they had mooned about quite as long as, that night, Jack had a mind for; he was tired, sleepy, would light up one more cigar, to last him as far as the hotel, and then drop a quiet hint that it was time they began to move homewards.

'I thought you'd want to stop here'—they were crossing the Ponte della Paglia.

'I can never go by without having a look at that place.'

Mr. Veriker's eyes were turned towards the Bridge of Sighs.

'To think of those,' he said, 'who have crossed over there with the song of death sounding in their ears.'

'Ah!' and Jack leaned over to watch the descent of his fusee as it dropped into the dark water below, 'that's a music we none of us care much for.'

'And yet we have to listen, whether we like it or not.'

'When our time comes I suppose we have.'

'And who knows how soon that may be? Death has so many doors to let out life.'

'True; but he's not in any immediate hurry to open yours or mine just yet, I hope.'

'Oh! I don't know. If I was alone in the world, I should not much care. Life has not so many charms left for me.'

He had taken up his place by Jack's side, and was resting his arms on the stone-work.

'The sting of death in my case is having to leave a girl fatherless, friendless, penniless, as Robin will be.'

'Yes, that's a serious consideration.'

Jack's face became thoughtful. Robin alone, unprotected! His heart grew big towards her.

'But long before anything of that sort is likely to happen,' and his tone sounded prophetically confident, 'she is certain to have some one to fill your place.'

'Fill my place! how fill my place?'

Jack smiled. Already he foresaw the rivalry that was likely to exist between Robin's husband and her father.

'Why, you expect her to marry, don't you ?—she'll have a husband !'

'Nothing more unlikely,' said Mr. Veriker sharply. 'Whom does she see, in the life we lead, that I should care for her to marry ? No, no ; the husband I want for Robin is a simple honest fellow, who would work to maintain his wife ; not such an one as myself, living God knows how.'

Without a syllable on which he could lay hold being spoken, Jack felt an arrow had been aimed at him.

'It is to be hoped you will find your daughter's taste runs with your own,' he said cynically.

'No, I don't expect that. Robin is too much her mother's child to take prudence for a guide where her heart is concerned. And that is why I have felt a little disturbed that you and she have been so

much together of late. Not on your account. You have seen too much of life to give a second thought to a girl like Robin, and I don't harbour a suspicion that you would trifle in any way with her. But—well, there's a woman's heart beating inside the child, full of love to be poured out like water at the touch of the one who places his finger on the right spring, and —it may be only my fancy—but I have thought her a little altered of late, pre-occupied, variable, silent. I dare say it's my imagination, but it has nevertheless managed to give me a considerable amount of worry.'

The dark cloud which had gathered on Jack's face rolled away while listening to that birth of love begotten of himself, as he knew it to be.

'Don't be anxious because you think I

do not care for Robin,' he began, and the softened tones of his voice was but another whip to goad on Mr. Veriker's fears. 'I——'

'Should be fifty thousand times more anxious if I thought you did,' interrupted Mr. Veriker quickly. 'No, my dear fellow, don't misunderstand me; the confidence I place in you is my sheet-anchor; I know you well enough to be quite certain that, seeing what Robin's position is—without anyone to guide her, and nobody to look after her but a scapegrace of a father, who leaves her entirely to her own devices—you would be the last to take advantage of my supineness or her situation.'

'I don't know that taking an advantage ever occurred to me,' said Jack stiffly.

'Certainly it never did, and it never would to an honourable man; and in spite

of what the straitlaced may find to say against us, we haven't quite forgotten the meaning of that word, at all events in our dealings one with the other, eh ?'

Jack did not answer, but inwardly he winced under words which jarred on his inmost sensibilities, and set his pride in array. He ranked with Veriker! a man whose weak nature and shifty morality he despised; the sting was indeed bitter. True, for the last twelve months or so, it had happened that they had been greatly thrown together; but Jack considered the space between them in no way narrowed by the intercourse.

'What am I to understand ?' he said. 'Is it that you wish me to go away from here ?'—all thought of love for Robin had fled before the bare suspicion that any offer on his part was not an immense con

descension, one he had intended to hamper with restrictions and conditions such as became the surroundings he had been brought up in, rather than those by which he was now encircled.

'Away! no, certainly not. What I meant was not to be, well—quite so much with her as you are.'

'Who is to be with her, then?' and Jack put the question harshly. 'Do you wish her to run the place over by herself?—it was because of the bathing and the boating here together that you pressed me to come.'

'Yes, yes! I know,' and Mr. Veriker gave a despondent shake of the head; 'it's my own fault, as everything that has gone wrong in my life has been. Jack, I wonder sometimes you don't take warning by me. I wish to God you would—I should like to

think I'd done somebody some good before I—die.'

The word was forced out by an effort, but the effort was lost upon Jack.

'Oh, no doubt you'll do your daughter a good turn,' he said, 'if you succeed in finding this model son-in-law for yourself.'

'Ah, yes! now your back's up because of the way I took what you said about Robin.' (Jack was in the habit of giving his friends an occasional taste of a not over-easy temper.) 'But you don't know all the reasons I have for speaking as I did—you don't know that it's on the cards (for the little we have goes when I'm gone) that any moment—to-night, to-morrow, whenever you like to name—without word or warning she may be left destitute.'

'How?' and Jack turned with a sceptical

look; but something he saw arrested his further speech.

Mr. Veriker, overcome by the agitation of giving vent to the secret which all that day had hung on him like a log, had turned deathly white with a pallor visible in the moonlight; his features were drawn; his lips, rigid and parted, seemed striving to keep back the groans which the agony he was suffering would have made a relief.

'You're ill—faint!' exclaimed Jack.

By a gesture of the hand, which was clutched over his heart, Mr. Veriker indicated that the sudden spasm of unendurable pain was already abating.

'Better now,' he gasped in answer to Jack's anxious scrutiny—'it will pass in a minute;' and the tension of his limbs giving way, he dropped his head upon his arms, and let his face rest on them.

'Poor fellow!' thought Jack, 'there's something in this; he is really ill;' and a moment after, when Mr. Veriker recovered and looked up, he was met by an expression of earnest sympathy.

'I frightened you,' he said, with a poor attempt at smiling.

'I wasn't prepared to see you like this,' Jack answered; 'have you ever been taken so before?'

'Several times — not always so severe, but on and off very bad. No going to Monte Carlo this winter, Jack. Couldn't stand the tables; the excitement would kill me. I do pretty well while things go on smoothly; but get anxious, and it's all up with me. Any day I might drop down and "give in my chips," as the Yankees say. I mean it,' for Jack looked incredulous. 'Though I didn't tell you so, I went to

see North this morning, and asked him to speak out, to tell me the truth—because of Robin, you know; and though, as he said, I might hang on for years, he advised me, if I had any affairs to settle, to put them in order.'

'Well, I think he was wise there; and you'll do so, won't you? It will save you anxiety, besides being the right thing to do for your daughter.'

Mr. Veriker sighed.

'Poor child,' he said; 'it's late in the day to try and begin to set the wrong I have done her, right. I haven't a penny to leave her; I haven't a friend to trust her to. Oh! I see it all now: my cursed selfishness kept her with me, when I ought to have given her up to those who at least could have provided her with food to eat, and a roof to shelter her. But no; I wouldn't part with

her, and now I dare say they'd see her starve before they'd hold out a finger to help her.'

'Have you tried them?'

'No; it's been on my mind to write for the last month and more, but I can't swallow down my pride; it seems to stick in my gizzard more and more.'

'Are they relations of yours?'

'After a fashion they are. It's the husband of Robin's mother's sister. I like to make the connection as roundabout as I can—it puts the fellow further from me. He's a brute that turns everything into money that he touches.'

'Ah!' sighed Jack, 'I wish he'd rub shoulders with me, then.'

'It wouldn't matter—whatever came of it would stick to him. Soon after my wife died, they offered to take Robin; but I wouldn't let her go, and as they took it as a mortal

offence, since then we haven't troubled each other much.'

'But if they knew, don't you think they'd take her now?'

'Do you think she'd leave me?'

'Oh, they could hardly expect that; but in case of anything happening to you, people could hardly see their sister's child cast on the world a beggar, without coming forward to assist her in some way.'

'Oh, I don't know—besides, the sister herself is dead now, so the claim is less than ever.'

'Still, you seem to have had some idea of writing to ask.'

'Simply because I don't know of any other thing to do; and when I'm driven into a corner by the thought of that girl with her looks, and her spirit, left alone in the world, without a living soul to turn to,

Jack, I could pray God to see her dead rather than leave her to all she may be exposed to. They might find her a situation —something to do, mightn't they?'

Jack made no reply.

'She can chatter away in French and Italian, you know; and she has picked up enough music—the Lord only knows how—to play on the piano, and she's got a voice like a nightingale. Something might be made of all that, one would think, eh? what should you say?'

Jack shook his head impatiently.

'I haven't an idea,' he said. 'What I'm wondering at is that you, knowing all this, should have stopped what you fancied I might be going to say as you did. What made you do it, eh?'

'About your having a liking for her, do you mean?'

Jack nodded assent.

Mr. Veriker seemed about to answer, hesitated, cast a furtive look at Jack, and then, apparently overcome by a resolution which mastered him, he said firmly:

'Well, I'll tell you; you're too much like myself—you don't like that, do you?' for Jack had drawn himself up and stood his six feet erect. 'I understand. There was a time when I shouldn't have liked it. When I was your age, there were men then whom I said I could never be like; but gradually I slid down to their level, as you'll do to mine. Mine! far lower than mine, for as you have the making of a better man in you than ever I had in me, so, if nothing stops you, you'll fall to a depth I never should have touched; and that's why I don't want the child to care for you, as something makes me half afraid she has

already begun to do. It isn't that I don't like you, Jack. If it wasn't for Robin, I'd rather have you about with us than any fellow I know, but——'

'There's no need to say any more,' said Jack coldly, 'you've given me quite reasons enough.'

'And I've offended you by them. That's what I feared I should do if I spoke the truth.'

'No, I am not at all offended, if it is any satisfaction to you. I am very much obliged. You have shown me what it is always good for us to know—how we are regarded by other people.'

Did he mean what he said? was he angry or not? Sometimes with Jack it was very difficult to decide, and Mr. Veriker was still trying to discover, when Jack added:

'And to show how obliged I am to you, I shall try to hit on some plan so as to leave Venice as soon as possible.'

'What—leave here altogether?'

'Isn't that the best thing I can do?'

Mr. Veriker was silent.

'I suppose it is,' he said at length. 'I don't know, though, how Robin and I shall get on without you—we've got so used to being all together, it seems hard to part. But there, perhaps it's best—I don't know.'

'By far the best,' said Jack resolutely. 'I feel now that I ought to have gone away long ago. I had no right to stay on when I knew I had nothing to offer Robin. If I had, I should ask her now to share it with me.'

'Thank you, Jack,' said Mr. Veriker more heartily; 'it's kind of you to say

that, and I wish I could show you that I feel it so.'

'Write that letter, then, about Robin to those people you spoke of.'

'You advise it, do you?'

'In your place I would do it without a day's delay.'

'Come along then; I'll go back home and write it to-night. If a thing's to be done, they say there's no time like the present. A hundred to one if I leave it hanging over me until to-morrow, I shall never do it at all.'

CHAPTER III.

JACK walked with Mr. Veriker to the door of his hotel, bade him good-night, made him renew his promise, and then left him, not to fulfil the intention he had announced of going straight off to bed, but to retrace his steps to the spot he had just left, as being the fittest place for undisturbed reflection.

He wanted to take commune with himself, to review his past, and reflect on his present situation—a by no means pleasant

task, for Jack was a stern master, not more lenient to himself than he was to others.

There was nothing uncommon about his story. It was the oft-told tale of a struggle between newly-fledged independence and overstrained authority. As long as Jack was bound to obey, his uncle, Mr. Chandos, had not pushed him to extremities; but the moment it came upon him that his nephew was free, imperceptibly the reins tightened, and this notwithstanding the restiveness Jack showed each time the curb was felt by him.

Uncle and nephew had inherited the same disposition: each desired his own way, and had a rooted dislike to be thwarted or interfered with. Who was now to give in? not Jack, he had always given in; not Mr. Chandos, he had never given in. By

turns over-blamed, over-praised, thwarted, made much of, Jack's bringing-up had left a great deal to be desired. His father was dead, had died when Jack was a child; his mother had married again, and had gone to India to be engrossed by fresh interests and new surroundings. Jack, left at school, was understood to be adopted by his uncle, who had recently inherited an estate which obliged him to assume the name of Chandos.

At the time he became possessed of this property, Mr. Chandos was past fifty, and a bachelor. He had never married, because, had he done so, he must have deprived himself of luxuries which, far more than a wife, he found essential to his comfort.

Now that he was master of a good income, and owner of a handsome estate, he regretted his former wisdom; it was not

that he wanted a wife, but he wanted an heir, one born of his own body, so that he might feel that even when he was dead, a part of himself still enjoyed what he had left behind.

To a mind so constituted, Jack's presence could never be entirely welcome, and in token of it the boy was kept at school; and when the holiday-time came round, and he returned home, it was generally to find the Manor shut up, his uncle away, and he expected to spend his vacation with the Temples at the Rectory.

Under such circumstances, was it possible that much affection should exist between them? Aunt Temple—the rector's wife, in reality a cousin of the Dorians—was always holding up Mr. Chandos as a bogie to Jack, and to her own children.

Frightened to death of him herself, she

seemed to desire that others should be inspired with a similar awe; and not being gifted with the spirit of reticence, when out of humour she freely commented on her cousin's obstinacy and selfishness, and openly laughed at an old fellow like that being married for love.

For, with the strange craving most of us have to possess that which is beyond our reach, Mr. Chandos desired to find favour with some young girl who would bestow her heart on him; and it was after this chimerical idea he sought, and, though over fifteen years had passed, he was still seeking.

In the meantime, though he never failed to remind Jack that it was not probable he would ever have more than the few thousands his father had left him, and the little which he, his uncle, might choose to

add to it, he interfered with every plan the boy formed.

What! want to be a soldier! to be sent off no one could say where, to die of fever or to be killed in battle! Pray, in case of anything happening to him, who was to inherit Chandos Manor?—the idea was absurd. Jack would like to be an engineer The possible future owner of Chandos Manor working at the construction of railways or making steam engines!—the bare notion was degrading.

Mr. Chandos had provided for Jack during his stay at Eton, he now desired that he would go to Oxford, enter himself at a college where he could work, and so be ready—should it be needed—with knowledge to be turned to account.

With a very ill grace, to Oxford Jack went; soon was mixed up with a very fast

set; spent more money than he had any right to spend; had his debts paid; promised amendment; broke his word; got into a serious scrape, was rusticated; and then, threatened by his uncle, grew obstinate, rebellious, defiant, refused to acknowledge that he was under any authority to him, and ended by drawing out the money which had been invested for him, and which, being of age, he could claim as his own, sending his uncle a cheque for the sum he had paid for his debts at Oxford; and with a not unprovoked letter to Mr. Chandos by way of farewell, Jack bade adieu to England, and started for Paris, determined to enjoy abroad the spending of some portion of those thousands which still remained to his credit.

We all know how endless in the eyes of

youth seems the first large sum of money it has command of. It appeared to Jack that such a sum would last—well, if not for ever, for far longer than he should want to be knocking idly about. Besides, it was not likely that his uncle would hold out now, when he had given in so often; for of late years there had always been a tug of war ending in a compromise between the two.

Everybody said Mr. Chandos would never marry, and if he did not, Jack must have the place if he did not have the money; and then the people about were all on his side. The rector was certain to say a good word for him, and as for Aunt Temple, she said in her letter that she'd never let his uncle have any peace until he sent and had Jack back among them.

Mistaken friends, who, by their ill-judged

zeal, only made an obstinate man more resolute than before; he was more furious against Jack than ever when he found how many advocates he had to plead his cause.

Unfortunately the London season was over, and nearer, in his own neighbourhood, none of the ladies on promotion met his taste. So his man was ordered to pack his things without delay that he might go to Harrogate, Scarborough; search the marriage markets of the United Kingdom over, but he would return with a bride, and have an heir who should make his insolent nephew hide his diminished head.

But seeking is one thing, finding another, more especially when the object sought for is to be adorned by all the graces and gifted by all the virtues. Nearly five years had passed away, and Mr. Chandos was still on

the look-out, heralded by the prestige of being a rich man seeking for a wife.

People at home began to lose hope and to give up pleading for Jack, and a fear spreading abroad that if Mr. Chandos did not marry, he would leave his property elsewhere, Mrs. Temple began to think that, if Jack did not have it, she did not see why her girls should not reap the benefit. There were three of them: Isabel, Georgy, and Dora; they were nearer to him than strangers could be.

No one could say that she was not fond of Jack; but still, in their position, it was like giving countenance to evil, not to take some notice if the reports were true; and people did say that he had become quite a gambler, and associated with very odd persons, who lived by their wits, nobody knew how.

So Jack's correspondents first made their letters brief, then cold, and then gave up writing altogether. Evidently his relatives were bent on dropping him. Well, they must do as pleased them best; and he feigned to smile as if the thought amused him, when in reality it stung him to the quick. For much as appearances seemed against him, of late Jack's mode of life had been a matter of necessity rather than of choice. He was already about to break into the last few hundred pounds of that inexhaustible sum with which he had started, and when that was gone, where was he to turn for more?

A dozen spectres rose up before him, each of whom bore a likeness to some needy adventurer whom Jack despised. Was there no better fate in store for him, than that he should sink down to the level of such

men as these? of every one of whom was told the tale of wealth, position, credit gone; all staked, and lost.

During the two months of perfect quiet which Jack had spent at Venice with the Verikers—who had stayed on there first because Mr. Veriker had been unwell, and afterwards because at that season everything was so cheap—he had ample opportunity for reflection, but it seemed as if something was needed to bring him to the point of action. This something had been just supplied in the blow Mr. Veriker had given him. For a moment his pride had been overcome by indignation, but the sight of the father's despair over the misery he foresaw for his daughter had made Jack realise his own situation. As he was, Mr. Veriker had been; unless a change came, what Mr. Veriker was he might be.

'Never! never! never!'

He turned suddenly round—it was his own voice that had startled him. In his excitement he had spoken the words aloud.

The movement changed his former dreaming into a more vigorous train of thought—something must be done. By what means could he do it? where were his friends? and to whom among them could he apply?

He did not cast a thought towards his uncle, and gradually, one by one, he set aside as useless all those who had any immediate intercourse with him; and, having by these means thinned the ranks very considerably, he found himself reduced to a choice of two alternatives. He must apply to Mr. Clarkson—who had been his father's lawyer, and who had condemned

most unsparingly the folly of his former proceedings; or put an advertisement into some paper for work—work of any kind, he did not care what. In the heat of his present state he felt that breaking stones on the road would be preferable to his present life.

With the desire to escape obligation to Mr. Clarkson, he inclined towards advertising until reminded that a reference would probably be asked, and to whom could he refer? No; the first plan was best, he must swallow his pride, and ask the favour of the old fellow. He could but say 'No;' and if he did, then he would try the paper. But how to word his request? Jack's steps were now turned towards his hotel. During that walk back, he framed fifty letters seemingly eloquent enough then, but unsuitable to the last degree when, seated in

zeal, only made an obstinate man more resolute than before; he was more furious against Jack than ever when he found how many advocates he had to plead his cause.

Unfortunately the London season was over, and nearer, in his own neighbourhood, none of the ladies on promotion met his taste. So his man was ordered to pack his things without delay that he might go to Harrogate, Scarborough; search the marriage markets of the United Kingdom over, but he would return with a bride, and have an heir who should make his insolent nephew hide his diminished head.

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his room, pen in hand, he was prepared to commit his thoughts to paper.

'"DEAR MR. CLARKSON,—DEAR SIR,—DEAR MR. CLARKSON,"—

'Oh, it's of no use: I can't do it!' and jumping up he flung down his pen. 'I've thought and thought till I'm sick of thinking, and not a word that I want to say will come.'

Then after two or three minutes' standing, during which there crept into his face an expression of indomitable will, Jack seated himself again at the table, and without waiting or giving himself any further time to consider, he wrote:

'DEAR MR. CLARKSON,

'When we parted we were both angry with each other. You, because I

persisted in doing what was foolish; I, because you persisted in advising what was wise.

'Your prophecy has come to pass. In a foreign land I have wasted my substance in riotous living; and now that I begin, like the prodigal, to be in want, no man offers to assist me. So far a confession of the past; now for the future. I mean to work, and live independently of anybody. I won't apply to my uncle. My mother is too far away; will you give me your assistance? I am ready to turn my hand to anything, so if you have any writing, or copying, or anything that in an office is found to do; or if you will employ me, or say a word in my favour to anybody else, I shall be much obliged to you. I shall remain in Venice as long as I think there is any chance of your answering this

letter, but as I want to be employed, the quicker I can find something to do the better.'

'Yours sincerely,

'JOHN DORIAN.'

CHAPTER IV.

UNDER the weary suspense which followed the sending of those two letters, for it happened that in the same bag with Jack's lay the one which Mr. Veriker had written, the elder man became silent and depressed, the younger anxious and irritable. Neither cared to discuss with the other the steps he had taken, and by tacit consent of both not a word was to be breathed to Robin. She, poor child, ignorant of any cause, racked her brains in trying to discover what had gone

wrong with her father, and what could have changed Jack, so that in some ways—and here came forth a most lugubrious sigh—he was not a bit like the same to her. Time was, and barely more than a month since too, when Robin would have frankly asked the question. But now a certain self-consciousness forbade inquiry, as first a flood of colour, and then a shower of tears, recalled looks no longer given; and the hand her face was leaning against she thrust out of sight, because of a tormenting fear that it had been left trembling too long in a palm waiting for a pressure which had not come.

Experience had given Robin some familiarity with Jack's idiosyncrasies. She knew it was impossible for him to take things easily; knew that a trivial accident, a misadventure passed unheeded by her

father, would put Jack out for the day. She had seen him on—seemingly to her—slight provocations give way to outbursts of anger which had almost terrified her, but in balance to these failings he had qualities which Robin thought belonged to nobody but him; for, in the sad experience of her young life, whom else had she known in whom she could place implicit trust, to tell her what was right, to point out what was wrong, and show by all his dealings that he practised the honesty he taught?

The girl heaped on her father the treasures of a love which for years had had nothing else to spend itself upon; but though she shut her eyes to his failings, she winced under the knowledge of them, and by turns grew angry and pleaded with a sense of honour which compelled her to condemn many things she saw him do. It

was Jack who had first taught her to be ashamed of practices which up to that time everyone had applauded her for: cunning evasions, clever misleadings, shifty advantages in payments and purchases. Oh, how bitterly had she been galled by Jack's outspoken opinion of such dealings!

It was soon after their more intimate acquaintance that, indignant at such a training, he had reproached her father in no measured terms, to be recalled to the fact of Robin's presence by seeing her rush from the room in a passion of tears. Distressed at having unintentionally wounded the child, who among her father's visitors was a universal favourite, he presented himself the next day with a fine package of bonbons, and finding her alone, asked her forgiveness as he placed them in her hands.

An explanation followed, the poor swelling heart was opened to seek counsel and direction, and from that day Jack and Robin became sworn friends, master and pupil—the master inclined at times to abuse the privilege of his position by encouraging, petting, scolding, neglecting, as the mood was on him. On occasions, carried away by some whirlwind of passion, Jack for months would seem lost to Robin: she here, he there; would they ever meet again?

Oh yes! the fancy over, at one of the head-quarters of resort back would come Jack, to be welcomed none the less warmly, because Robin felt certain in herself that he was suffering the tortures of a broken heart.

At Monaco during the previous winter they had seen more than ever of each other,

and after being parted for a short time, it was at Robin's entreaty more than at Mr. Veriker's request that Jack had joined them at Venice.

For two months they had lived daily in one another's company, so engrossed that they had failed to notice how little they missed other society. Even the flimsy pretexts by which Mr. Veriker sought to hide the failing health which prevented his joining them, they accepted as veritable excuses for his stopping behind; and while they were absent the hours ran so swiftly that as he did not say so, they never guessed that time could hang heavy on his hands!

Oh, happy season! Oh, magic birth! which Robin felt quicken into life before she knew what name to call it by; and Jack, who before had often masqueraded with the passion, now that it came un-

disguised, refused to believe the voice that called it love.

Alas! the moment he was resolved to stay away, to see less of Robin, to avoid her company, the struggle he had to make revealed the truth; and, almost absurd as the idea was of being in love with Robin, Jack had to confess that the child to whom, after a very blundering fashion, he had tried to tell what long ago they had told him was the right thing to do, had contrived, while learning the lesson, to steal away his heart and give him in exchange her own.

Pity him then when Robin's brown eyes turn to plead in vain, for Jack, now fully alive to his share of blame in the past intercourse between them, in extenuation of his fault resolved that neither by speech nor action would he further betray his trust—the promise he had given her father, to the

letter he would keep; and until he had something to offer, he would not utter a single word.

It was this resolution which made silence about his project a necessity; he felt he must not overtax his strength, which was hardly equal to more than the announcement of his departure on the day it had to be made. Whether anything or nothing came of his letter, he would leave Venice. So far, that was settled; the point at issue was, what should he find to do?

Each time he was near the post—and how many excuses he found to be in its neighbourhood—he went in to ask if anything had come for him, to be told, 'No,' until his heart sickened; and then, when hope had dwindled very low and the question seemed scarcely worth putting, a letter was handed to him which he had opened,

read, and read again, without any distinct notion of its contents beyond the fact that his steps were keeping time to a voice which sang, 'It's all right, all right; he has found something for me to do!' The something—connected with a bank transaction at Bucharest—was, as Jack knew in after-days, a difficulty invented by Mr. Clarkson for the occasion. The good friend desired to test the faith of the prodigal, who was to start on his mission immediately he received the letter.

This meant leaving Venice without delay; and having ascertained that a train went out that night at eleven o'clock, Jack, who, influenced by that unacknowledged superstition which discourages preparation, had left everything to be done, found himself fully occupied until late in the afternoon, when he went to the Verikers'

hotel to announce his departure to his friends.

'I've had an answer to my letter; it's all right—I am leaving here this evening.'

While Jack spoke, his eyes had been wandering round the room. Robin was not there. Mr. Veriker was sitting alone.

'Well, Jack,' he said, with a deep-drawn sigh, 'I suppose I ought to say I'm glad, but I can't—it sticks in my throat somehow. You know, though, don't you—that it's all right—that I'm glad you're satisfied, sorry as I am to lose you?'

'Come, it was you who set me on to it,' said Jack, hoping to brighten him. 'I don't believe I should ever have written, but for what you said to me.'

'No—wouldn't you? I hope it will turn out well, then. It's about the only good

advice I ever did give, so it ought to succeed.'

'I hope so, and I think it will.'

With the rebound of youth, Jack was all impatience to be gone; the sooner he went, the sooner would he begin that battle by which Robin was to be won.

'He's a first-rate old fellow who has given me a hand.'

'Not the uncle, then, you once spoke of?'

'No, I didn't write to him—he's done with me, I think; was going to get married when last I heard.'

'Ah! that's what you'll be doing I dare say—as soon as you're settled down respectably. You'll forget all about us, I expect; and the best thing for you, too.'

Jack made no reply.

'Is Robin out?' he asked.

'No; she was here sitting by the window

a minute ago—didn't you see her as you came in ?'

'No; I'll go and look for her;' but before Jack could move, the door opened, and Robin appeared.

'It's Jack,' said Mr. Veriker, with the haste a melancholy man is in to announce bad news; 'he's come to tell us he is going away.'

'Yes; is he ?'

'Going away to-night. I tell him,' he added, seeing that Robin stood so calm, 'that he'll very soon forget all about us.'

'I think—yes, I have forgotten something. I'm coming back again.'

The door shut—Robin was gone.

'She'll miss you as much as anyone,' said Mr. Veriker, with a nod of his head in the direction of the door. 'I don't know what she'll do when you're gone.'

'I hope you'll look after her,' said Jack. 'Go about with her more than you do—you seem,' he added bitterly, 'to forget that she's a child no longer, and that men don't look on her as such.' Then, after a minute's pause, 'You haven't heard, have you, from the relations you wrote to, yet?'

Mr. Veriker shook his head.

'They'll never trouble themselves to answer,' he said. 'I might have known that before I sent the letter—only drowning men catch at straws.'

'Well, it does not matter so much now,' and Jack smiled cheerily; 'only, while I think of it, I may as well give you an address which will find me at any time—of course I shall write; but in case of anything happening, you know;' and he wrote on a piece of paper a direction which he

folded up and gave to Mr. Veriker. 'There, take care of it,' he said; 'that will always fetch me; and now I think I'll go and look after Robin.'

'Oh, she'll be back in a minute. You're not in any hurry to go yet, are you?'

'Well, I have not very long to stay; besides, I want to ask her about something which she can tell me;' and he went out into the passage, off from which was Robin's room.

Already the sound of his footsteps had brought her to meet him, and taking within his her little cold hands, he stopped her, saying, as he did so:

'You haven't asked me where I'm going, Robin.'

'You're going away,' she said simply. What mattered place or distance, so they had to part?

'Well, but I've gone away before, haven't I?'

'Yes.'

'And I have come back again. Haven't I always come back to you again, eh?'

'Yes.'

'Then why should I not come back now? Listen. I mean to come as soon as ever I possibly can. You believe me, don't you?'

'Yes,' she faltered, and the splash splash of the tears, which were falling on his hands, came faster than before. 'Only, I don't feel we shall ever be the same—not Jack and Robin—never, never, never!' and the eyes that looked up big with tears made such a tender appeal, that Jack's strength all but gave way—he must gather her in his arms and set her heart at ease by telling her she had his love.

Fortunately for his resolve, the opening of a door recalled him to his senses.

'Oh, that's right, you're not gone yet;' it was Mr. Veriker who spoke. 'What do you say to our seeing you off—going to the station with you? Eh, Robin, shall we? You'd like to, wouldn't you?'

'It was just what I was asking her to do,' said Jack, tightening his hold of her hands in the effort at recovery.

'Then we'll go. We've been all in the downs both of us to-day, so it will cheer us up to see the last of the only friend we have left.'

Jack was already at the foot of the stairs.

'Here, I say, don't go off like that; how are we to meet? what steps are you starting from?'

Mr. Veriker hurried along to get a reply

to his question, but when he returned to tell the hour and place to Robin, she was nowhere to be found.

Perhaps Mr. Veriker felt some suspicion of his daughter's secret; any way, when later on Robin made her appearance, he made no remark on her flushed cheeks and swollen eyes, but launched out into the reasons Jack had for going away, and the prospects which no doubt would open out before him; and growing more oracular as he talked, he gave it as his opinion that Jack was one who would go far, soon find his place in the world, and make his fortune.

'So good-bye to any more of him that you or I will ever see, Robin. I know how it is—it has all happened to me a score of times before. It isn't their fault: they mean to keep it up, but after a few letters,

a little time goes by, and then by degrees, or suddenly, altogether, the whole acquaintance comes to an end.'

Robin gave an assenting nod—it was the easiest way of dismissing the question; besides, notwithstanding her wish to defend Jack, the words her father spoke seemed to find an echo in her heart, over which a gathered load of unshed tears lay heavy.

* * * * *

What a mercy is the bustle of departure! Under its shelter how many farewell agonies are hidden.

A rapid glance at Robin's tear-stained face had photographed itself in Jack's memory. Those wistful eyes, filled with unbidden tears, which gathered, rolled slowly down, and fell unheeded, came between him and all he looked at.

Mr. Veriker, in his sympathy casting prudence to the winds, had seated himself near the gondolier. It was best for the luggage, would keep the boat trim, besides which he wanted the fellow to give them a song.

Jack had the place by Robin. Hidden in the darkness of those narrow highways, through which their course to the railway had to be taken, who could see them? Drowned in the sound of song and plash of water, who could hear them? Surely now he will speak; say something, if but a word, to show her that her fancy is not led astray, that he holds her different now to when he used to pet, tease, scold her! Has he not in reproof told her that she was grown into a woman?—then is she not one for him?

'Oh, Jack——' as the words rise to her

lips she turns her face full on him, plunges her eyes into his, as if to drag the secret from out his heart, and for an instant searching there they stay—to turn and drop their gaze into the waters they are passing through; for the knell is sounded to her hopes, by Jack's murmured:

'Poor child, poor Robin!'

And very soon, it seemed, the station was reached, and there were some Italians there they knew, and there was a great bustle and noise of leave-taking, in the midst of which she and Jack said good-bye.

And now he had started, was gone, and they were on their way back again, her father by her side, sitting in Jack's place, his head sunk on his breast, all his gay humour vanished. And she—Robin—shed no tears now: they were all frozen up, and lay like a stone on the sepulchre of her

love; and as the gondolier's song fell on her ear, she sighed, for the words ran :

'Voria saver che prova più dolore,
L'omo che parte o la dona che resta.
Dona che resta, aresta con dolore ;
L'omo che parte trova' n' altro amore.'

CHAPTER V.

DURING the month which followed Jack Dorian's departure, several letters had come from him—three in the first fortnight, and after the lapse of a week another, which still waited a reply. Strangely enough Robin, who during any of Jack's former absences had been ready on the slightest provocation to plunge into a correspondence with him, now shirked writing—seemed to regard answering his letters as a task of which, seeing she had much to occupy her, her father might well relieve her.

'All right then, I'll set about it to-morrow, Mr. Veriker would reply—to-morrow was always Mr. Veriker's time for doing anything he had to do—and the morrow come, Robin, who by some intuition always seemed to discover that the thing had not been done, would say a trifle sharply:

'If you don't write soon, dear, you may as well give up writing altogether. Jack will have left the place he was at, and the letter won't reach him.'

'Then like a good girl sit down and write the letter yourself; then it will be done without any more delay.'

But no; in this Robin would not be persuaded. She had something to make, something to mend, something which would occupy her time too fully to leave any leisure for writing to Jack.

She did not say that since he had left

them she had commenced a hundred letters to him; each one torn up and scattered to the winds, because in her desire to sting she was conscious of betraying a bitterness which she strove in vain not to discover. The cruel certainty that Jack had but amused himself—still regarding her as a plaything—had curdled Robin's fresh love, and left her filled with the desire to stab, wound, give pain in some way to him who had made her so cruelly suffer.

She was but a few months past seventeen—age when Sorrow's hand strikes so sharply, and Time's healing comes so swiftly.

Unluckily, too, situated as they were just now, there was nothing in her life to distract her. The bathing season over, the Italians whom they had known were gone away; and among the many travellers who came, there was no one whom they knew.

Accustomed to see her father easy, gay, and overflowing with good spirits, Robin could not reconcile herself to the change which had come over him. He who had ever sought pleasure, and found distraction in every form of excitement, seemed now incapable of being amused by anything or anybody. In place of the old rattle of jest and small-talk, which, poured out between him and Robin, had made the hours when they were together have wings, he would sit silent and gloomy, only making an effort to speak when his daughter's questions obliged him to give a reply. He would beg her to go out, and grow impatient at being left alone; would propose a walk, and find some excuse why she should go one way and he another.

At her wits'-end to know the cause of the change, Robin was fain to set it down

to the dull life they were leading; but when she proposed going away, Mr. Veriker saw no reason for leaving. On the contrary, there were times when he spoke of spending the winter at Venice, and the very next day perhaps he talked of packing up, and being off before the week was out. Nothing pleased him, suited him, satisfied him; and in place of that unruffled temper, and the easy good-humour which had smoothed all difficulties and gained him a hundred friends, he was sharp, irritable, and had fits of anger such as Robin had never seen him give way to before. Life for both of them seemed to have changed its hue; it had been rose-coloured, it was now grey: a mist obscured the sun, clouds had overcast the sky—happiness had taken flight, Jack had gone away.

One morning after Robin had been taking a stroll in the public gardens, and had come

to fetch her father, so that they might go out for their dinner as usual, she surprised him reading a telegram which for a moment he seemed inclined to hide, and then held out towards her.

'A surprise for you,' he said: 'somebody is coming—here—to see us.'

'Somebody!'

The world only contained one *somebody* for Robin; and the blood which had rushed to her heart, mounted up and flooded her neck and face, so that though her eyes were on the words, the letters danced before them.

'Christopher Blunt,' she said at length. 'Christopher Blunt,' she repeated dreamily. '*Who* is Christopher Blunt, papa? I never heard the name.'

'Oh yes! yes! you have,' said Mr. Veriker hastily; 'it's the man who married your

poor mother's sister. They offered to take you when she died, and adopt you as their own child. You've often heard me speak of it in days gone by.'

'Of course I remember now,' said Robin, becoming alive to the laboured way in which her father was speaking, and noticing that he had been lying down on the sofa, on which he was still half reclining, that his necktie was loosened, and that there was a strong smell of ether in the room. 'Have you not been well, papa?'

'Not quite; nothing much: a little faint —it's been a hot day, I think.'

'But you seemed all right when I went away.'

'Well, my dear, so I was, but I can't sign an agreement to always remain as you leave me. I wish I could. Have you read what he says?'

Robin had been going over the words this time with understanding, and a gradual comprehension of what they were meant to convey.

From	*To*
CHRISTOPHER BLUNT,	ASTON VERIKER,
Verona,	Hôtel Bregno,
	Venice.

'Leave here to-morrow; reach Venice by evening train. Please meet me at station.'

'Why that means to-night,' she said, running her eyes back to the date of despatch. 'It was sent yesterday; how is it we didn't get it, I wonder?'

'Well, that I mean to inquire about; the fellow who brought it only knew that he had been told to deliver it. Considering how they manage their affairs here, the wonder is we've ever had it at all.'

Mr. Veriker was trying, while letting his lips speak, to arrange what more he should say to Robin. She on her part, paying no heed to his words, was thinking what could possibly be bringing this man to see them.

'Isn't it very odd his coming?—You dislike him so, don't you? Have you any idea why it is?'

'Why it is I dislike him? Oh, my ideas are perfectly clear on that score, certainly;' and he gave a little laugh which experience had taught his daughter was meant to conceal a certain shiftiness of answer.

'I thought you'd know that was not what I meant,' she said gravely; 'only it seems so odd for a person with whom you have had nothing to do for years, to all at once send a telegram like this, that I fancied you might have written, or have had a letter from him perhaps.'

'No, that is the only communication I have had from him: what he has in his head by coming I know no more than you do.'

'Shall you go to the station?'

'Decidedly I shall. Who knows?—he may be going to make us heirs to his property.'

'Not likely—he has a son, hasn't he?'

'He had. Look here, Bobby! perhaps he may have come to ask your hand in marriage for him.'

Robin gave a contemptuous little 'H'm He might have spared himself the trouble, then.'

'Why?' said her father; 'you must marry some day.'

'Some day—that is very far off, then.'

'I don't know that—it would be a very great ease to my mind to see you provided

for. Think, if I had to leave you, how friendless you would be.'

'Leave me! How leave me?'

Mr. Veriker looked up and the eyes of the father and daughter met, and in an instant they were locked in each other's arms, their faces wetted by each other's tears.

'Father, father! don't talk like that—whom have I left me in the world but you?'

The shadow had come so near that, for the first time, Robin had perceived it, and something within her whispered that its name was Death.

CHAPTER VI.

MANY years had passed since Mr. Veriker and Mr. Blunt had met —years in which the one man had mounted Fortune's ladder with as much ease as the other had slipped down it. They had married sisters, the one bond of union between them, if that can be called union which is the origin and motive-power of dissension ; for Mr. Veriker, unmindful of a sacrifice which had been chiefly made to afford a home for the girl he had taken as wife, began by the determination to

separate her as effectually as possible from those who belonged to her.

Necessity does not demand the details which made Robina Hamilton marry Mr. Blunt. Suffice it to say, that at the time he made his offer, she and her sister Alice were living on the charity of those who made the bread of dependence very bitter. Mr. Blunt, a self-made man, who had risen from workman to master, was uneducated, middle-aged, and a widower, but he was able to offer independence; and mightiest of all the arguments in his favour, there would be a home to give to Alice, her young sister. Robina Hamilton seemed to have come into the world to sacrifice her inclinations to the interests of others, therefore, when she saw that the welfare of the being dearest to her would be furthered by her marriage, she set her personal scruples on one side and hesitated no longer.

From the hour of this contemplated marriage, and through all the years after, Mrs. Blunt lived the life of a martyr; her sensitive nature revolting against, her refinement outraged by, the man whom she had vowed to honour. But from her conduct she allowed no one ever to guess this; and when, in due time, Alice became the wife of Mr. Veriker, and it was apparent that he intended to withdraw from any intimacy which entailed the companionship of Mr. Blunt, Robina sacrificed the love she bore her sister to the obedience she had promised to render to her husband. Before undertaking her duties she had examined their requirements, and now that she was put to the test her strength was not wanting.

Perhaps her greatest trial was in being forced to listen to the indignation of Mr.

Blunt, indignation the more bitter because it was he who had most furthered this marriage, for the tumult—caused by seeing Alice unjustly treated—over, Mrs. Blunt could not give her hearty approval of Mr. Veriker, who, in spite of his good looks and fascinating manners, was not the husband she would have chosen for her sister.

But in this her better judgment was overruled; Alice would not believe it possible that her lover could have a fault, and Mr. Blunt, with the unacknowledged desire of being brother-in-law to a man who was cousin to a lord, shut his eyes to everything but the fact that Mr. Veriker's name was to be found in the 'Peerage.'

But unluckily before long Mr. Veriker's name was also to be found in the bankruptcy list, and then it was that revenge came sweet.

Mr. Blunt would listen to no appeal. *He* lend *his* money to a fellow who had turned up his nose at him! not if he knew it, he wouldn't. No, no! let him go to his cousins, Lord this or Lord that, and see what they thought of him; he thought him a swindler, a vagabond, a cheat who had entered the house of an honest man and imposed himself on a respectable family, and so he'd tell him if ever the opportunity was given him. And the opportunity being given him, a scene of recrimination took place, which separated the two men for ever: it even divided the sisters; and the Verikers soon after taking flight from England, Mrs. Blunt had to call up all the fortitude she could muster, in order to bear the burden she had imposed on herself.

There was one duty attached to her sad lot which very soon became a pleasure.

Her husband had a son—a boy of six or seven—whose birth had made Mr. Blunt a widower. The child had come late in his married life after years of desire, as if Fortune, having begun to shower gifts, could not stay her hand from bestowing anything he asked of her.

But in their fulfilment wishes sometimes entail an undreamed-of penalty; in this case it was the death of his wife, a weak, sickly woman for whom he never had seemingly cared much, but who left a vacant place in his heart which no one else could ever fill, for she had been his early choice, the partner of his struggles, the companion in his difficulties.

Through the whole period of her expectancy the poor wife felt her joy overshadowed by the dread of her coming end, but she never allowed her fears to be

suspected by her husband; and when with life ebbing fast away she pointed to the child and tried to smile, a rush of tenderness such as he had never felt before mastered the strong man, and he offered God back the child he had coveted, if in exchange He would spare him the wife he had never valued.

To see, therefore, Robina make this boy the object of her maternal care gave her a hold on Mr. Blunt that nothing else could have effected; and when some years later, at great risk to herself, she nursed little Christopher through a terrible fever, and by her devotion saved his life, although Mr. Blunt said little, he registered a solemn vow, that ask what she might, he would not deny her.

But Mrs. Blunt was not a woman to make demands, and a very long time went

by ere her husband was called on to redeem his—to her—unknown pledge.

That sudden exodus of the Verikers from England had seemed their starting-point of downfall; from that time they were constantly in difficulties, sometimes at home, sometimes abroad—now sinking, now swimming—within an ace of making a fortune, on the very brink of ruin.

In vain did Robina urge all she could think of, and often more than even to herself she could justify, in Mr. Veriker's defence; but of what use advancing the plea of extravagant habits to a man who had contrived to save on a pound a week? how could she echo the lament that it was impossible to live on three hundred a year when Mr. Blunt had thought himself passing rich on less than half that sum?

Tender heart! she did the best she could,

and by saving, pinching, and denying herself in every way, she contrived from time to time to send her sister some substantial proof of her love, more especially after a little girl was born, to whom they made her godmother, and gave the name of Robina.

This child was six years old when, after an illness of short duration, the news came of her mother's death, and then it was that Mrs. Blunt made her appeal, and Mr. Blunt granted her request. A letter was sent to Mr. Veriker, offering to take the child, and, with the understanding that he would make no later claim on her, adopt her as their daughter.

The request—in the making of which Mr. Blunt insisted on putting in a word here and there—came to a bowed-down, sorrow-stricken man. Mr. Veriker, in spite

of all the follies by which he had tried her, worshipped his wife with a lover-like devotion to the end; the child she had borne him was as the apple of his eye.

Resign this, his only treasure, to those who, besides stealing her love from him, would bring her up to hate and despise her father! No! rather would he jump into the river with her; and his gall being stirred by their wish to rob him of all that remained of that wife so dear, he flung back his refusal worded with so much disdain and bitterness, that it was impossible for a time that Mrs. Blunt should ask her husband to reconsider the subject.

Later on she wrote herself, but no reply came. Another, and another letter, begging for news of the child, remained unanswered. What was to be done? The question was more than ever before her mind when an

illness prostrated her, which at an unexpected moment took a fatal turn, and she rapidly sank—but not before she had said to her husband in presence of his son Christopher:

'Promise to remember that Alice's child is my godchild, and that her name is Robina.'

Seven years had gone by between the night when those words were spoken and the morning when Mr. Veriker's letter brought them back to Mr. Blunt's memory, but the impression they had made was not worn out, and the telegram just received was the result of their influence.

CHAPTER VII.

SEEING that if Mr. Blunt was to be met at the station there was no time left for delay, Mr. Veriker hastily sought to restore his daughter's composure by laughing at her fears, and declaring that except for a little faintness which he could perfectly account for, he felt as well as he ever had felt in his life.

'Upon my word,' he said, 'I don't know what people would say of two silly geese who can't take a joke without flinging themselves into one another's arms. I

don't know which deserves a whipping most, you or I.'

Robin smiled. The shadow past, she wondered herself why she had been struck with such sudden fear.

'But you looked so,' she said, 'I couldn't help it, papa.'

'Bless my soul! I must take care not to look like that again, at least not to-night, or I may have old Blunt's sixteen-stone weight on my neck.'

'Oh, he's a big man, is he?' said Robin.

'Big!' said Mr. Veriker, puffing out his cheeks and swelling himself into an attitude of great importance. 'In his own estimate there isn't a street in England wide enough for him to walk down. The Grand Canal may serve him, but nothing narrower, depend on that.'

'What are you going to do with him, papa?'

'That depends on what he wishes to be done with. It's time, however, I set off to see, or the train will be in, and he will be off, and I shan't be there.'

He talked while re-arranging his collar and necktie, hoping to divert his daughter's attention from his movements. He had decided to go to the station, but the effort to get there was costing him more than even to himself he cared to own.

'If she were only out of the room, I should get on better,' he thought, oppressed by the desire to draw a deep breath, and stopped by the certain recurrence of a sharp stab of pain, which, when it came, had forced him to cry out.

'Robin, what if you were to go as far as the steps and see if you could find Paolo? I'll follow directly after.'

Robin threw on her hat: in an instant she had gone. Paolo was waiting there, and she secured him and his gondola.

'It's all right; I've got him,' she called out as soon as she caught sight of her father, and running to meet him, she turned and walked by his side. 'I'd best look after myself about dinner, hadn't I? You're most likely to go off somewhere with him, and if not, you'll come back at once, I suppose?'

'Of course I shall,' Mr. Veriker managed to say.

Distressed as he was by this indescribable sense of suffering, the mere giving utterance to a word was a labour. He had felt nothing like this since the night when he had spoken to Jack Dorian, and a presentiment haunted him that at sight of his old enemy a similar spasm would attack him. The bare sup-

position of that agony brought out a damp sweat upon his forehead; a trembling seized upon his limbs. Overcome by a sickening nervousness that he could not master, he made a stop.

'After all,' he said, drawing in his breath as if seized with sudden pain, 'I shan't be able to go and meet this man. For Heaven's sake, my dear, don't look at me like that' (Robin had turned on him a face filled with alarm): 'it's nothing but a passing distress, which I hoped some brandy that I took before coming out would have set straight, but it hasn't done so.'

'Whatever shall we do, papa?'

'Do? Oh! why you must go instead of me, that's all. Tell him I came as far as here, but I didn't feel well and couldn't get on; and that I want to know where he means to stop, so that I may see him

either to-night, or the first thing to-morrow morning.'

Robin hailed Paolo, and made a sign to him that she was ready.

'And I was going to say,' added Mr. Veriker, 'if he begins asking any questions about me, remember that you don't know anything. Say that I said so, but that I would explain everything to him. You understand?'

Robin assented.

It was not the first time such a caution had been given her.

'You're safe to spot him,' continued her father—'big, fat, pompous-looking, with a red face, and Britisher marked on every line of it.'

'I'll find him out,' she said, searching in her pocket for a coin to bestow on the old fellow who was holding the boat. 'And

afterwards I'll come back as soon as ever I can.'

'Let Paolo wait and bring you back, unless you see that you can be of any service. You know I want you to edge yourself into the old brute's good graces. Don't forget to let him know that you're called Robin after your aunt Robina, and—here, I say,' for she was already taking her seat, 'while you're there, suppose you make a stretch, and see how it sounds to call him uncle.'

'Uncle!' cried Robin, with a little gesture of contempt. 'Come, I like that;' and her fears being lightened by this seeming return of her father's usual manner, she kissed her hand, showing a smiling, bright face, as the boat pushed off and away.

The moon was beginning to rise—its slender cresset hung in a cloudless sky,

yet, in the narrow canals through which their way led, the light had long ago died out. Except for the swish of water when something went swiftly by, not a sound disturbed the silence, and Robin, who at starting had been busily arranging what she would do and say, gradually forgot the object of her present journey, and let creep into her mind the recollection of the last time she had gone that way; how Paolo had taken them then; how her father had made him sing, and, without seeming to listen to the song, Jack had sat by her side.

Leaned back, hidden in the darkness, Robin let her tears flow fast—flow out of pity for her own sad case: she was so young to have her love thrown back upon herself, so friendless, so desolate, for, although unacknowledged even in thought, the chill of

that shadow she had seen hovering near her father still ran cold within her, and its icy presence had ousted out love to fill its place by a great yearning after sympathy. Oh for an ear into which she could pour her troubles! a breast on which she could sob out her sorrow! Involuntarily her arms were stretched out, only to fall listlessly down a moment later, for who was there now to answer that appeal? Jack had left her—Jack had forsaken her.

The raised voice of Paolo, as with a dexterous movement he shot his gondola into the very midst of noise and bustle, roused Robin from her dreaming. They were nearing the station, passing the Ca d'Oro, whose front shone here and there in flecks of light. The struggle to push ahead warned them that they had no time to spare, and the sound of the near approaching train was

heard as Robin began to mount the station steps.

'Big, fat, pompous,' she found herself repeating, as some minutes later she stood reviewing the individual travellers who, in all the wild confusion of a foreign arrival, seemed to crowd round and pass before her. Englishmen there were, and in very respectable numbers too, but not one among them in any way answering to that description.

'He can't have come,' she thought, giving a sigh of relief as she retraced her steps back from a scrutiny which had extended to the very end carriage of the train; 'they have all gone—that is, nearly all,' for her attention was at that minute drawn to a young man whom she had passed before, but without .taking any notice of him—perhaps she would not have noticed him now, but that

as her glance fell on him he turned abruptly away, making it apparent that he had been watching her.

Either to save himself embarrassment, or that he had really a question to put, he left his luggage standing while he stepped over to speak to a porter—an opportunity seized by Robin to crane her neck as she passed by and read the letters, which, painted white on his Gladstone bag, stood no doubt as the initials of the bashful owner. 'C. B.'

Her voice confirmed what her eyes had seen, and then her face in turn grew very red, for she had spoken aloud, and the young man had heard her.

'I beg your pardon,' she stammered; 'but I am trying to find some one.'

'Are you? So am I,' and he stopped.

'You're not Mr. Blunt, are you?'

'Yes, I am—is your name Veriker?'

'I am Robin Veriker.'

'What! Mr. Veriker's daughter? I am Mr. Blunt's son.'

'Oh, that accounts for it, then; I was looking for your father;' and they both shook hands, took a little survey of each other, and then laughed rather shyly.

'Isn't Mr. Blunt with you?' asked Robin.

'No; he never intended coming. Mr. Veriker has had his letter, hasn't he?'

'I don't think so; he was very surprised when he got the telegram—it only reached us this evening—and thinking it was your father, he wondered rather what was bringing him.'

'Oh!—ah, yes!'

Mr. Veriker's letter had warned them that his state of health was not known to his daughter. Christopher now guessed that

the appeal he had made had been also kept from her.

'I shall have all that to explain to him. I hope he is well.'

'No, not quite, he isn't, or he would have come himself to meet you. He did attempt it, but he was obliged to go back—it has been very hot. I dare say you have felt it to-day, travelling. Have you anything beside what is here?'

'No; this is all.'

'Then shall we go?'

She led the way, Christopher following her.

'I have a gondola waiting for me,' she said, as they went down. 'I don't know what you are going to do, but can I take you anywhere?'

'Oh! thank you, I——' and he hesitated.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Well, frankly, I thought your father would have arranged for me. Evidently the letter has gone astray; it's only a question of an hotel, though. To which shall I go? Can you decide for me?'

'There are lots of hotels, only—I—was thinking whether perhaps it wouldn't be best to ask papa. I could run up to him while you waited at the steps—it's no distance; I shouldn't keep you.'

'Would it be troubling him?—perhaps it would if he is not well, and it does not in the least matter. I don't care where I am put, so long as I am not far off from you.'

'I wish I could ask you to come to us,' Robin said, her face growing a little rosy, 'but I dare say you know that we are not

very well off, and our hotel is one of those where English people never go. It is kept by an Italian—you know the sort of place. It would not suit you in the least, I feel certain of that.'

'I wish you would let me try,' said Christopher; 'I am not at all difficult to please, and my object in coming was to see as much of you as I possibly could.'

'Was it?' Robin's look betrayed her surprise. 'Did you only come to see us, then?'

'That was all. It seems to astonish you.'

'It does rather, because, you know, I have been used to think we were great enemies.'

'But you don't think so now?'

She shook her head.

'No, I don't. Come along; we will go

and ask papa;' and turning, she said something to the porter, adding to Christopher, 'I've told him to take on your luggage and hail the gondola.'

CHAPTER VIII.

COMING from under the covered station out on the steps, Christopher's bewildered senses seemed lost in amazement. The scene which lay before him was so unlike anything he had ever looked upon, that he could scarce persuade himself it was not the conjured-up art of some magician's wand, and, following Robin, he elbowed his way through the crowd, and got into the gondola like one in a dream.

The wondrous grandeur of that line of palaces, shown by the moon's pale light, in

all their majesty; the glitter of a thousand twinkles reflected on the surface of that glassy water; the weird, fantastic boats passing, crossing, shooting ahead of each other, guided by the strange cries of the gondoliers—all was new to Christopher, who felt each moment a fresh demand made on his interest and attention.

'How wonderful,' he said, 'all this seems to me!'

'Why, have you never been here before?' asked Robin.

'Never—I was going to say I had never been abroad before; but once, during the Exhibition, I went with my father to Paris—coming so far as this was quite an undertaking for me.'

Robin turned on him a look of inquiry.

'Are you wondering,' he said, with a

half-amused smile, 'what made me come so far?'

'Well, yes;' and she blushed and laughed, adding quickly, 'but you need not tell me if it is anything to do with papa, because it might be about business which he would not care for me to know. Men get mixed up with such a lot of things,' she continued, by way explanation, 'betting and racing and playing, that, to my mind, girls are best out of altogether.'

For a moment Christopher was a little taken aback.

'I'm very glad to hear you say so,' he said gravely. 'I have a horror of gambling myself.'

'Have you? Oh, I haven't a bit, if one was only always able to win—it's the losing I hate. Papa hadn't any decent luck at all last vear. I don't fancy we shall go to

Monaco this season;' she made a little pause. 'He does not seem well,' she said thoughtfully; 'his spirits are not the same—I can't think why. You don't know any reason, do you?'

'Oh, I suffer dreadfully from low spirits myself, without any reason at all,' said Christopher evasively; 'that is why this change may do me good, and it might be the same with your father. If I could persuade him to come to England, what would you say?'

'Say he wasn't to go without me.'

The earnestness of her words made Christopher smile.

'You would not consent to be parted from him then,' he said jestingly.

'Parted! that was what you wanted to do once before,' she said fiercely, 'to part us, and I have hated you for it ever since;

and I shall hate you a thousand times more if you try now in any way to attempt it.'

'That is right! I am very glad to hear you say so. No, no—believe me, very far from my mind is it to wish to separate you and your father.'

The sympathy in his voice touched Robin; and the tears, which for the last few hours had lain very close to her eyes, welled over and fell in a quick shower.

'I don't know what is the matter with me to-day,' she said, struggling to regain composure. 'I seem to be ready to laugh or cry if anyone but holds up his finger to me—I'm not always quite so foolish, you know, but—he isn't well—that—I can see; and—if you are only two, it does make such a difference, doesn't it? You haven't anyone but a father, have you?'

'No; I have lost my mother—that is, the one who was a mother to me—your aunt, Robina. It was she who told me about you, who used to talk of you, who gave me the desire to see the one who was named after her.'

Robin nodded her head—she could not trust herself to speak just then, and they went on in silence. Out of the Grand Canal they had now turned into one of the narrow passages in the midst of darkness, with all around hushed and still.

Gliding swiftly, stealthily on, they seemed like shadows who have left life's shore to 'shape their course into the silent land.' The thought came to Christopher, and there ran through him a little shiver.

'You are cold,' said Robin, as they shot out into light again; 'but here we are close to the steps now, there in front, do

you see? I won't keep you any time while I run up—if you don't mind, I think it would be best that I should first speak to papa.'

She was soon in the Calle S. Moisè and across the bridge, close to which stood their unpretending hotel. Her father was upstairs in his room, the door of which she pushed gently open and entered.

'Better?' she asked anxiously, as she tiptoed in.

'Right as a nine-pin; I knew I should be. Well, what about him?—has he come?'

'Yes; I've hooked my fish and am waiting to land him. Such fun at the station; it's the greatest wonder I did not miss him! It's the son, not the father—the father never meant to come.'

'Never meant to come!'

Mr. Veriker sat suddenly upright so that he might face his daughter.

'Do you mean that we're to be spared the old ruffian altogether?'

'Yes. He thought you knew. He says they sent you a letter!'

'When did they send me a letter?'

'I don't know; but we mustn't stop to talk about that now, because he's waiting—he wants to know if he can't come here and be with us altogether.'

'But certainly bring him to me—let me clasp him to my beating heart!'

'Yes; but think of what the house is like, papa—be serious, now, do.'

'Never more so, my dear. I'm only dying to hug the fellow like a bear, for joy that he hasn't turned out to be his old father. Joking apart, though, I see no reason on earth why he shouldn't come.

What's he like, eh ?' and the screw up he gave to his face showed that the opinion he had formed was by no means flattering to Christopher.

'No; he's not a bit like that,' said Robin promptly. 'Perhaps you wouldn't pick him out for looking like a gentleman, but it would never enter your mind to think him vulgar. I like him so far, and if'—and she let her eyes wander round—'you think it would do, I should like him to come here.'

'Off you go and bring him back with you, then. Hang it all, if a Veriker can put up with the place, it's good enough for a Blunt any day !'

The life into which Christopher Blunt was about to plunge was as new to him as though an Icelander should be sud-

denly dropped down into the heart of Africa.

For years the word 'home,' in the sense of social intercourse and family ties, had for him had no meaning. It was true that he and his father inhabited one house together, but they would have been bound closer to each other had fifty miles separated them. They had not a taste, an idea, a thought, in common. Mr. Blunt's one aim in life had been to get on, his pride to be counted a cute fellow. Success had so far rewarded his efforts that he was now a rich man with —strange as it sounds, but more common than it appears—the experience that it is sometimes easier to make money than it is to spend it.

Not content to remain where his eyes were constantly caught by the rungs of the ladder by which he had mounted, some

few years before he had purchased an estate on which he had gone to live, under the idea of setting himself up as a county magnate. Why not? He had always ranked people according to the riches with which they were surrounded, and if he lived in the biggest house, kept the most servants, and drove the best horses, surely he would be entitled to a corresponding amount of consideration.

So in prospect of the position he was about to assume, he had, to quote his own statement, the place put in thorough repair, the gardens arranged after the most approved fashion, and the house done up to his standard of decorative perfection, 'to look as if no money had been spared upon it,' and having altered the old place—the dwelling of a family who had held it for generations—into an eyesore to all the sur-

rounding neighbourhood, Mr. Blunt, in all the pomp of pride and glory, came down and took up his abode there, and was furious because nobody showed any disposition to welcome him. Some few called, others took no notice; the rector did not entertain, the squire was always away, and though some years had now elapsed since he came to Wadpole, but very little progress towards further intimacy had been effected.

As is natural in such a condition, Mr. Blunt sought every cause but the real one; his most fixed idea being that the house needed a mistress, his son Christopher must marry. Easy enough to say, and in the case of most young men with such prospects, easy enough to carry out; but unfortunately for the speedy accomplishment of his father's desires, young

rounding neighbourhood, Mr. Blunt, in all the pomp of pride and glory, came down and took up his abode there, and was furious because nobody showed any disposition to welcome him. Some few called, others took no notice; the rector did not entertain, the squire was always away, and though some years had now elapsed since he came to Wadpole, but very little progress towards further intimacy had been effected.

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Christopher was shy, retiring, and sensitive to a degree.

Fully alive to the ostentation and vulgar display which delighted his father, the son winced under the contempt he saw it drew forth, and nothing would induce him to thrust himself among persons whose cold toleration humiliated him with the sense of a false position. Added to this, he bore the burden of constitutionally delicate health, a misfortune which but added strength to Mr. Blunt's wishes. Unwilling to acknowledge that anything belonging to him could labour under defect or imperfection, he attributed his son's frequent indispositions to the way he had been brought up.

'It's been overdone,' he said: 'he's had too much care, he's been completely molly-coddled; he wants a spice of the devil put into him.'

And with Mr. Veriker's letter in his hand, the thought came of what a past master in that art was the man from whom this letter had come. Christopher while speaking of the Verikers, had let drop a wish to see Italy, and above all to see Venice. Why not let him go?—it was an opportunity which might not occur again.

'What do you say,' he said, 'to setting off at once and sifting out how much truth there is in what he says here?'

Christopher caught at the suggestion. Since the death of his stepmother, he had been possessed with a great desire to find out the child who had lain so close to her heart.

'You'll write and tell them to expect me,' he said before starting.

'But I shan't know when you'll get there —not the exact day, I shan't.'

'Oh, I'll send a telegram to tell them that, but you prepare them—I can't bear dropping down on people unawares.'

'All right,' said the father, and he nodded his head in farewell, adding inwardly, 'and that's just what I want you to do, my boy: never give the devil the chance of getting his boots on, or he'll take good care his cloven foot don't meet your eye.'

CHAPTER IX.

IF the art of making people feel at ease consists in being thoroughly at ease one's self, it was an utter impossibility for anyone to suffer constraint in Mr. Veriker's presence, and the greeting he gave to Christopher, although it fell short of the metaphor he had indulged in, was sufficiently warm to do away with all embarrassment between them. Induced by the tender solicitations of Robin, which were backed by the half-shy entreaties of Chris-

topher, Mr. Veriker consented to make the effort to try and go out so that they might have dinner together.

'To the Caffè Quadri,' Robin suggested. 'A table in the window, so that we can hear the band play.'

'Come on, then, let's be off,' said Mr. Veriker. 'Christopher, you must be our guest, and Robin shall order the dinner for us—we always make her caterer for the mess.'

'Then as you will want to walk slowly, papa, wouldn't it be best for me to run on, then we shan't be kept waiting so long, you know?'

'And give you an opportunity of bamboozling Erasmo, your favourite waiter?'

'Certainly, if I can get as much by it as we used at the Lido;' and a sudden quick blush overspread her face, which had not

died away when she turned and was gone.

Mr. Veriker waited for an instant until she was out of sight, and then tightening the hold he had taken of Christopher's arm, he said with an altogether altered voice, and quite a different manner:

'I wish I could tell you half the gratitude I feel to you for coming here—the idea of such a possibility never entered my head; but if I had thought for a year I couldn't have hit on anything that would have given me such complete satisfaction—the last hour seems to have made another man of me.'

It was Christopher's turn to look pleased.

'I am so glad to hear you say that,' he said heartily, 'because all the time I had my doubts—I wondered whether you would care to see me; indeed, more than once,

I said so to my father, but he pooh-poohed the idea completely, and insisted on my setting off without waiting to write the letter in which I had thought of announcing my intention.'

'It was very good of your father, after all that has passed between us, to let you come; you must tell him from me that I said so.'

'Yes, but I hope you'll have an opportunity of telling him yourself.'

Christopher had not been with them more than an hour, and already visions of seeing the two comfortably settled close to Wadpole were floating before him, his usual shyness—that embarrassment he was wont to feel with strangers—in this case did not seem to oppress him.

Mr. Veriker shook his head as if there ran through him a shiver.

'No,' he said, 'not likely—I shall never see England again,' and he choked down a rising sigh; 'but that little girl of mine, when you've seen what she is, been with her, found out her ways, got to know her—well, she won't be left so utterly friendless and desolate, that I'm certain of—— By the way,' he added, interrupting Christopher, who was beginning to speak, 'she knows nothing of what I wrote about; she fancies I'm not quite the thing, but of this,' and he gave a vague indication that it was his heart he meant, 'not a syllable. I could not bear the sight of her sorrow; it would take away every chance I have—all depends on my keeping myself quiet, you know.'

'I was most careful, after what your letter said, not to give her a hint of the reason why I had come to see you,' Christopher answered earnestly; 'but as to her

being friendless, that never could have happened, so long as those are left who owe so much to one whose name she bears.'

'Ah, her aunt Robina, your step-mother, you mean; yes, she was a devoted, good creature, wasn't she? it must go with the name I suppose, for this girl is an angel—nothing short of it.'

'She looks like one,' said Christopher simply.

Mr. Veriker threw a quick glance on him.

'You like her look then—you're not disappointed in her?'

'Disappointed!' and Christopher smiled. 'No—perhaps I had pictured to myself that she would be more like what I remember her aunt, but she is quite different to her; her face seems to me very beautiful. She is like you.'

'You must tell her so,' and Mr. Veriker shook Christopher's hand approvingly, 'tell her you think she is like me; nothing pleases her better than to be thought like her scapegrace of a father. Come, that ought to score one on my side, oughtn't it?'

But Christopher did not answer. Out from the narrow Merceria they had passed through into the Piazza, and the novelty of the unexpected change was sufficient to account for his silence: the fantastic outlines of that marvellous Basilica, the stretch of palaces, the tall masts, the solitary Campanile — here standing out plainly visible, there cast into shadow—filled him with wonder and amazement. Bewildered, he walked on all unmindful of something Mr. Veriker was telling him, until a sudden halt brought back his senses.

'Here we are! this is our place;' and nodding pleasantly to the occupants of the chairs through which he and Christopher had to thread their way, Mr. Veriker made for the entrance of the *caffè*.

The usual hour for dinner was past, and already people were beginning to congregate outside, establishing themselves to listen to the band while they chatted together over coffee and ices.

At the foot of the staircase inside the door, Erasmo, with face wreathed in smiles of welcome, was waiting to receive them and usher them up into the cheerful room, where at a raised table in her favourite end-window Robin was already seated. She had taken off her hat and, half leaning out of the window, was trying with little pellets of bread to coax some stray pigeons on to the sill. Hearing footsteps she turned her head.

'Ah, here you are! that is right,' she said. 'Now then let me arrange you. No, no, papa, not there—I am going to sit there,' and she indicated the seat reserved for her father; 'and this chair,' and she laid her hand on the back of one near, 'I thought would be nicest for——' there was an intentional pause, and then she turned her speech into, 'Will you sit here?' adding before Christopher had time to accept, 'What ought I to call him? I don't quite know—Christopher seems so terribly familiar; and if I say Mr. Blunt I shall think he is his father.'

'Oh, I can't stand having him called Mr. Blunt,' exclaimed Mr. Veriker quickly.

'But if you will—and don't mind,' said Christopher, 'I should think it so kind of you to call me by my Christian name.'

'Shall I? Would you really like it?

But if so, you must call me Robin, remember; I won't answer any longer to Miss Veriker.'

'Miss Veriker!' echoed her father. '*You* Miss Veriker! why, Bobby, you were never Miss Veriker to anyone in your life.'

'Hush, sir!' she said, assuming a great show of dignity; 'hold your tongue, if you please! How do you know what he thinks of me? I may make a great impression on—Christopher.'

Oh, the wicked twinkle which for her especial benefit he managed, unobserved by Christopher, to throw into his eye! No wonder that Robin turned quickly round and began to feign much interest in the arrival of the dinner.

Although Christopher—because he had never enjoyed a dinner so much in his life—asked permission to keep the *menu*, he had

not the faintest conception of what he had been eating. He knew that dish after dish had succeeded one the other, and that over every one they had laughed and talked together, until into him there was infused a gaiety of mood and manner such as he would never have credited a sober, matter-of-fact mortal like himself with possessing. What had come to him he could not tell, but so new was the feeling, that he was oppressed by the idea that presently he should wake up to find it was all a dream, and that Robin, her father, the lights, music, people, all, had vanished.

'Try as I may, I cannot get it out of my head that I am looking at a play,' he kept repeating, reluctant to leave the window out of which he and Robin were leaning.

Mr. Veriker, more at ease than he had felt for weeks, was lounging stretched out on one

of the velvet-covered settees; his eyes were half closed, and without being asleep he was enjoying the sweets of repose.

'Every minute I feel down will go the curtain, and the whole thing will be over.'

Robin shook her head. Novel as the scene was to Christopher, to her it had become familiar.

'Night after night,' she said, 'especially when the band plays, all the people turn out, and walk up and down here.'

What a motley, fantastic throng was passing to and fro before their eyes—women gaily dressed or wrapped in their black mantillas; soldiers; sailors with red caps; smartly sashed gondoliers! Christopher, fascinated, declared that he could stand there for hours.

'I feel as if I should never be tired of watching them,' he said.

'I often feel so, too; and do you make up stories about them? I do. I think what some are saying and others answering—people like those for instance,' and she pointed to a young girl surrounded by a small crowd of admirers, amongst whom, with a look from her eyes, a smile thrown over her shoulder, and the aid of her fan, she was managing to preserve the balance of good-humour.

'I'm afraid that she is a little bit of a flirt,' said Christopher, after watching her; 'it looks like it by the way she is encouraging them all.'

'And why shouldn't she, eh? What harm does it do?'

'*They* might tell you a great deal of harm. Suppose the poor fellows are in love with her.'

'And suppose so!'

'Well, she has but one heart to bestow,

and those who don't get it may die of despair, for aught we know.'

Christopher was smiling, but Robin's face had grown very serious.

'Oh no!' she said. 'Men play at being in love; it is only women who die because their hearts are broken.'

'What is it that women die of?' asked Mr. Veriker, whose drowsy ear had been caught by this last sentence.

'Of colds, through being kept waiting at open windows while their fathers pretend to be sleeping,' she answered promptly.

'Then come on down with you—do,' and he jumped up and shook himself, adding gaily, 'I'm good for a cup of coffee and a seat at the Giardino Reale, to listen to the music, while you and Christopher take a turn among the people; he's dying to find out if there are any women worth looking at, I can see.'

So together the three—Mr. Veriker in the middle, with an arm through each of theirs —made their way across the Piazza in the direction of the Caffè Giardino Reale.

'You shall drop me at a table, half-way up, if we can find one,' said Mr. Veriker. 'I expect it's pretty full by this time, though; it's their busiest hour, ten o'clock.'

Robin's eyes were darted here and there in search of the desired seat. Christopher, dazzled by the increased display of lights and the crowd of gaily dressed people, felt hopeless—a dozen chairs might be under his very nose and he wouldn't see them.

'Here you are, papa!' exclaimed Robin, indicating a seat not too near the bustle of the wonderful pavilion, yet close enough to hear the music, and to see the throng of passers-by as they promenaded up and down. 'There's only one man there, and

he will be somebody for you to talk to.'

'Then you two won't have anything now?' said Mr. Veriker, arranging his seat. 'You're off for a turn first, and then you'll come back here? All right; I shall be a fixture till you join me;' and turning to the young Italian who occupied the near chair, he made some remark which at once plunged them into conversation, so that, when Christopher and Robin from a little distance off looked back at him, he was laughing and talking, far too engrossed to notice them.

'Don't let us go into the middle of all those people there,' said Christopher. 'If you don't mind it, I would so much rather look at this than at them;' and he turned towards the water, and Robin followed him.

With the reaction that had set in at sight of the alteration in her father, her spirits had risen so that she seemed to tread the air.

'Do you know, Christopher,' she burst out suddenly, 'that I can hardly help throwing my arms round your neck, and giving you a great big hug? Oh, don't look so awfully afraid,' for Christopher's face betrayed his astonishment. 'I'm not going to do it, but I mean I feel as if I could.'

'Could you?' he said softly.

'Yes, indeed, and you wouldn't wonder either if you had seen how papa was, and how different he is since he has seen you. Well, you may guess by my crying as I did when I spoke of him to you. It was this afternoon he was talking to me, and all at once in his face there came a look, oh, so

terrible! I couldn't get it out of my mind. I thought something'—and a shiver supplied the word she dared not name—'was going to happen to him, that something dreadful must be the matter with him; and now,' and she clasped her hands joyfully, 'I see it was only my fancy, and that what all along—before—I thought the reason is true, he was just moped to death because of having nobody to speak to.'

'I'm sure I'm very glad I've come,' said Christopher heartily.

'Yes, but what made you come? what put it first into your head? how did you know where to find us out?—I can't fancy.'

'People in business can always find out where anyone they want is, through their bankers, you know,' said Christopher evasively; 'and then, ever since my step-

mother died, I have had it in my mind that when I grew strong enough and could do as I pleased, I should seek you out and try and get to know you—she often talked of you to me; I used to regret very much the loss of that little sister by adoption I was told it was once possible I might have had.'

'How strange!' said Robin thoughtfully, 'being loved and regretted by those one has never seen.'

'Ah, if she had been spared, and you could have had her to go to, it would be a blessing indeed,' and Christopher sighed. 'Almost the last words—about anything of this world—she spoke, was to commit you to my father's care. She was very fond of you.'

They had sat down on a stone seat, and with heads half turned were looking

over the waters far away. The moon was newly risen; the warm haze of the summer night hung low; lights played upon the glassy surface; from beyond came the lapping of a sea that knows no rest.

'And she was very fond of you too?' said Robin, breaking the silence which had succeeded Christopher's last words.

'Yes; after your mother died, I believe that you and I had the largest share of her heart; it was that which made her talk of you so much to me.'

'Then we ought to care a great deal for one another, you and I?'

She had turned her face and so had he —they were looking with earnest, serious gaze the one at the other.

'It is what I want,' Christopher said; and something made him add, 'I am a

very lonely creature: except my father, I have not a soul in the world to care for.'

Robin stretched out her hand.

'I know so well what that is,' she said quickly; 'it is the same with me: I seem to have such a lot to give, and no one to give it to.'

The words were said so despondingly that Christopher could but smile, but the smile was not one to offend Robin. Before he spoke again it was half reflected in her own face.

'Do you think it might become possible in time for you to give a little of that—love—affection to me?'

'But I think I have given it to you already; directly I saw you I felt certain I should like you, and now I am sure I shall—I do.'

Christopher gave a little shake to the hand that had been put into his.

'Then it is a bargain,' he said; 'from this time we are sworn friends, we are to care for each other very much.'

'Very much,' Robin echoed—'like brother and sister,' she added.

'Like brother and sister,' he repeated; 'and if there is anything you want, or want to have done, you'll come to me.'

Robin nodded her head.

'And I am to be of service to you as well,' she said, 'although I can't yet tell how.'

'I can,' he answered, looking at her: 'by letting me be of service to you, that is the greatest happiness you can give me. Make me feel that somebody in the world wants me,' and he raised the hand he held as if to carry it to his lips; but before he

could do so, Robin's face was leaned towards him.

'Not my hand, Christopher,' she said gravely. 'Kiss me.'

CHAPTER X.

THAT first evening which the three spent together remained all his life fresh in Christopher's memory; it was an epoch in his existence, the birth of a new life in which he was caught by the hand of friendship on the one side, and beckoned by the finger of love on the other. Years after, he could repeat and go over every trifling detail that had taken place, and the magic of Venice seen by him then, abided with him for ever.

When they got back to their hotel, and

Robin had left them, Christopher expected that he should hear some further explanations, but after two or three cursory remarks which served only to make light of his former fears, Mr. Veriker altogether avoided the subject. His anxiety relieved, his pains gone, back had come his old flow of high spirits, and he rattled on from one thing to the other until Christopher had to plead that the fatigue of the journey was beginning to tell upon him, and that in spite of his inclination to stay, he felt it would be wiser to go off to bed.

'Quite right,' said Mr. Veriker, 'for I heard by what she said at parting that you've got your day cut out and dried for you to-morrow. Thank Heaven! I've done with sightseeing; no more palaces, and churches, and galleries for me. I leave

to Robin the honour of doing cicerone—she's young and has the energy for it.'

'And the good-nature, too,' said Christopher, 'only I must take care not to let her overtire herself about it.'

'Oh, no fear of that with a gondola to take you where you want to go: besides you mustn't do too much at a time; there'll be no need to hurry. Now we've got you here we don't mean to let you off under a month or two, I can assure you.'

Christopher shook his head.

'I shan't be able to stay as long as that,' he said, 'but already you have made me feel so at home with you that I am sure it won't be for want of inclination.'

'Then we're quits, for, by Jove! to see me now, you wouldn't believe I was the same man I was a few hours ago. Depend upon it, it's best to have nothing to do with

those doctoring chaps; I know I wish I hadn't seen the one I went to. Not that I believe the half of what he said, only it isn't a cheerful idea to dwell upon, especially if a fellow happens to feel a bit seedy.'

'I must say you don't look very much of an invalid,' said Christopher laughingly—'not at all what I expected from your letter to find you.'

Mr. Veriker was delighted.

'A bit of a humbug, then, you think me? All right; never mind that, so long as it has brought you to us.'

'Oh, I heartily forgive you. For years it has been my wish to see you and Robin. As I was telling her this evening, hardly a day passed without my step-mother saying something to me about her. With her dying breath she spoke of her to my father, telling him always to remember that she

was the child of her sister, and bore the name of Robina.'

The words seemed to touch Mr. Veriker. He nodded his head, but made no answer; and Christopher, thinking it best to accept this as a signal of dismissal, bade him good-night and went off to the room that had been prepared for him.

Once alone, he sat down with some vague idea of collecting his thoughts and examining his impressions, a task quickly given up as impossible—ears, eyes, imagination, all had run riot. Visions of Robin floated before him; stories and smart sayings of Mr. Veriker rang in his ears; a dozen schemes and fancies filled his brain: nothing was to be hoped for that night—his senses had become unmanageable and so completely beyond his control that he saw his wisest plan would be to hurry into bed, and

trust to sleep and a night's rest for restoring, in place of this dazed being, the sober, matter-of-fact mortal he had up to this present time held himself to be.

Cramped by a continual atmosphere of repression, hitherto Christopher had rested ignorant of the capabilities for enjoyment which he possessed. This turmoil of new emotions, of gaiety and excitement, produced a sense of happiness entirely new to him, and he slept soundly and awoke refreshed, ready to carry out the plans which the night before he and Robin had made.

Those who know Venice will recall the life about to open out for Christopher, and such need not be told that a week there draws people closer together than years spent under ordinary circumstances in ordinary places.

From mid-day, when at Florian's, the Quadri, or at an old haunt of Mr. Veriker's on the Riva dei Schiavoni, the three met to breakfast together, they were seldom or never apart.

Each morning, long before Mr. Veriker was up, Robin and Christopher had started off to visit some church or see some picture. At that early hour busy life had not begun to stir, the windows of the palaces were still dark, empty gondolas waited at the water-washed stairs below. Between the pauses of talk they could hear the distant murmur of the sea—the sea that washed upon the shores of the Lido—and Robin would strangle at its birth a sigh, for was it not there that she and Jack had spent so many blissful hours together?

At the quay below the Rialto, they would come upon the market boats piled up with

fruit and greenery, fresh from far-off islands in the Lagoon, and dismissing Paolo, the two would saunter back through the Merceria, stopping like children here and there, caught by the sight of curious many-coloured shells, bright oriental stuffs, trinkets, gems, which soon, if Robin but admired, Christopher wanted at once to buy.

In the afternoon longer expeditions were undertaken. Only permit him to remain stretched at his ease on the cushions of the gondola, and Mr. Veriker never quarrelled at how far he was asked to go—Murano, Torcello, Chioggia—it did not matter in the least.

'All I bargain for is that we shall want some dinner,' he would say, 'so get back in decent time for that.'

After dinner, with his coffee, Mr. Veriker

liked a cigar, and while smoking it, a chat with some chance acquaintance who, posted up in the scandal of the place, could give him a little idea of what was going on around him. Robin, knowing his habits, would propose a stroll, and off together she and Christopher would go. Perhaps she would talk to him of her father, tell him of her past life, the places she had seen, the way they had lived there—Christopher only dropping in a word here and there to keep her talking, not caring what she said so long as he might listen and look at her.

When she had taken these walks with Jack, Robin had never cared to speak, and if he did not talk there would be long silences between them, when instead of words, tremulous, half-smothered happy sighs rose to her lips; but with Christopher, as with

her father, she had the desire to let her tongue run, and on from one subject to another it went without thought or care.

Only, two or three times, suddenly, in the midst, while she was yet speaking, a voice, a sound, the scent of a flower, the plash of an oar, would come as a sudden stab to her, and she would be seized by the impulse tc run away, far off to some place where alone, unseen, she might fling herself down and ease this passion of sobs which lay choking in her throat. How should she keep them back? She could not speak—at least not yet; so, pausing, with dumb-show she would bid Christopher look, and he, following her gaze, would stand as if rapt, looking out afar, not seeing the fair scene that lay before him there, for his eyes were turned within watching the tumult of a most rebellious heart which fought and

struggled, mocked by a voice which asked if its next cry was to be for the moon.

As distant and far off as seemed that moon which sailed above their heads, was any hope Christopher had that Robin should ever be moved to listen to his love. In that, he never cheated himself; he knew that very soon after he had first seen her, though why, or how, or when, it ceased to be his own, he could not tell, he had delivered up to Robin every atom of his heart—it was hers, solely hers, to stab, to sting, to trample on.

Bitterness to Christopher! who would willingly have endured any pain if but a germ of hope lay hidden in it, Robin did none of this; she simply accepted all that she saw he offered her, and taxed his strength to its utmost limits by the outspoken, frank affection in which she sought

to pay him back, pleasing herself and, as she seemed to think, him by constantly recalling to his mind that pledge they were under to look upon each other as sister and brother. Well! under that subterfuge, so long as it kept him near to be of service to her, he would remain; there would be time and enough of sad opportunity, when he got back into the dull routine of his solitary life, to face his difficulties, take himself in hand, and regain the mastery of self-control. Christopher never doubted but that this mastery would be his; he forgot that a great teacher has said, 'Withstand the beginning; after-remedies come too late.'

But blind as Robin was—for eyes closed by love for one away ofttimes fail to see love that has drawn near — Mr. Veriker suffered from no short-sightedness in this matter. It did not take him long before he

had come to a tolerably correct conclusion as to the turn affairs had taken. And how did the knowledge affect him? — it filled him by turns with satisfaction and displeasure: satisfaction inasmuch as Robin married, and his anxiety ended, what mattered anything so long as she was provided for? And then came the thought of how this provision would come about—by 'that old brute's son' marrying his daughter, and up would leap the fire of enmity fanned into flame by a hundred bitter memories, until Mr. Veriker in his wrath and indignation would swear she had better beg her bread—he would rather see her marry anyone—Jack?—oh, a thousand times rather Jack than Christopher, that is, so long as Christopher had a father; but fathers could not live for ever, and old Blunt, tough as he was, the wrong side of sixty, must drop off

some day, and then, surely there was nothing for Robin that he could desire better.

She was young, of an age when girls could be tempted into taking fancies; and with as much money as she cared for, to spend; a man who would worship her—take her where she liked to go, give her everything she wanted—what on earth more could any girl wish for? And yet, all this and more had been offered to her mother! and —God reward her!—she had flung it aside for his sake, had chosen him, stuck by him, given up all to marry him; and he had broken her heart—she had died, they said, of the ruin he had brought upon her.

'No! no!' he murmured, wiping his eyes, which of late were apt to grow dim whenever he dwelt, as he often dwelt now, on past days and old memories; 'I must try

and keep her child from making such a sacrifice. I won't think of Jack, we must give him the slip: it won't do—he's too much what I was, and we're not worth it, fellows like Jack and me.'

And then in his mind arose a more present difficulty.

Supposing anything did chance to happen to him, and Jack was written to as soon as he heard of it, if he fancied her left alone to get on as best she could, he'd be safe to come and see what was going to become of her; and if she'd found a home with the Blunts, or with somebody they knew, to have a fellow like Jack dropping suddenly down among a strait-laced set would never do.

'In their respectable eyes it would d—— her as completely,' he said, 'as if she had me constantly at her elbow.'

CHAPTER XI.

STRANGELY enough, since Christopher's arrival, neither Robin nor Mr. Veriker had once mentioned Jack before him. By tacit consent his name was avoided, and if in telling a story reference was obliged to be made to him, he was spoken of as a friend who happened at the time to be one of their party. Even to one another they had ceased to talk of him, and to the name once familiar—though it still lay ever on their tongues—they refused utterance.

'I want papa to forget,' Robin would say to herself—'to fancy that I don't think about Jack—that I don't care for him any more.'

Poor child! to have it suspected that she had given her love without it being asked or being wanted, seemed a terrible humiliation. For if Jack could not look on her as anything but a child, that her father should still regard her as one was a necessity; and though she well knew that girls sometimes married at her age, and that in some experiences she was older than many women, still the thought of being looked on by those two as forward beyond her years, brought blushes to her face, and filled her with shame and confusion.

What a relief it was to feel that Christopher knew nothing of this—dear, quiet, sober, matter-of-fact Christopher! With

him she could be as free as air without any fear of misinterpretation; she could say what she liked, as she pleased; they could discuss, speculate, argue about everything together, more especially about love, a theme that somehow always came uppermost—led to, Robin believed, by her desires—entered on, Christopher feared, by his hopes. Both professed great ignorance regarding it, and yet each spoke as if from experience—Robin wounding, slaying the tender passion with her tongue; Christopher upholding, pleading for, defending it.

How often—in after-days—Christopher went over those walks again, holding a knowledge then which shed a light on each discussion. Carried away, he would seem to stand on the very spot where the words were said; the surroundings of the

scene a cruelly faithful memory brought before him. Above, the stars; below, the sea—a forest of gondolas moored around the steps close by which they were standing. Sometimes, tempted by the beauty of the night, they would step into one of these and be rowed out to San Giorgio.

As long as he lived, Christopher never forgot one of those evenings, nor the enchantment in which they had enthralled him.

'Oh, how we shall miss him when he is gone!' Robin said over and over again to her father.

And Mr. Veriker agreed with her.

Of late, more especially for the last ten days or so, he had been constantly dwelling on the possibility of Robin herself having the desire to care for Christopher.

'She's got sense enough,' he said to himself, 'and, it's my belief, sees that it would be a good thing for her—that keeping mum about Jack, never dropping a syllable about him, shows to my mind that the wind's in that direction.'

And then he would sigh and premise that it was the best thing that could happen, particularly if she thought so. Women were odd fish, 'twas of no use men trying to fathom them. He had thought she meant to break her heart over Jack. 'Poor old Jack!' He felt quite sorry for him, grew sentimental each time he thought of him, until a certain day when—happily Robin was not with him—a letter was brought to him, a letter from Jack full of reproaches that he had been left so long a time without hearing a word about them.

Full of alarm, Mr. Veriker put this letter into his pocket. What was the use of upsetting everything now? He rather thought it was his duty to keep silent and say nothing about it; if he showed her what Jack had written, how could he tell in what way it would affect Robin? besides, beyond the present there was the future to be thought of.

The reading of that letter had thrown him into a state of agitation; one by one his fears began to awaken, and with each dull thud of his heart a mournful voice repeated: 'Jack must be got rid of—Jack must be got rid of.'

So with the idea of strengthening his resolution, but in reality as a relief to this fit of nervous emotion, he ran his eyes once more over the paper and then tore it up into atoms, which he threw away.

Perhaps the consciousness of this deception disposed Mr. Veriker to be the whole of the ensuing day more than usually critical with Christopher, so that, strive as he might, he could not help comparing everything he said or did with what Jack would have said or would have done in similar circumstances.

It had been arranged that the afternoon should be devoted to visiting Murano. The weather was perfect: an opal sky, an azure sea, with a filmy mist which softened without obscuring all it fell upon. Never before had Christopher felt himself so entirely under the influence of this external beauty; it seemed to enslave his imagination, to attack his senses so that he became absent and dreamy; and Robin, noticing his humour, began to twit him on his idleness and want of energy.

Assisted by her father, soon a dozen openings were given, each of which a more ready man would have seized on as an opportunity for furthering his suit; but for two reasons Christopher said nothing to the purpose—in the first place, the gift of ready speech had been denied him; in the second, his feelings were too earnest to find outlet in froth. Shallow waters run their course noisily; deep rivers flow silently.

To gauge Christopher, therefore, was beyond the depth of Mr. Veriker's power: remembering his own successes, his theory was that women as a rule give their love to those best practised in the art of winning it. What was the good of sitting mum and saying nothing?—a beggar that is dumb, you know.

'Ah, yes,' he said to himself, 'a beggar

that is dumb!' but this dumb beggar had eyes to look out of, not to see with, which is about all the use poor Christopher can make of his.'

And this led him to a mental survey of Jack's face, which had always been a puzzle to him, inasmuch as he knew, that so far as actual good looks went, his own beat it.

'But for real downright mischief,' he mused reflectively, 'upon my life, I'd back Jack's phisog against any other;' and without altering his position or letting his eyes wander to where Christopher and Robin were sitting, he conjured up the two he had so often seen there together—remembered how his weak nature had made him go back with Paolo so that he might avoid the embarrassment of feeling he ought to look after them.

A side-glance stolen at Robin showed him a head drooped, a face dreamy with a shadowed sadness in the far-off gaze of eyes which smote his heart heavily within him. Was it of Jack she was thinking? Poor child, why had he not looked after them better? Surely it might have struck any man who knew Jack as he did, that it was the right thing to do. And then, as a salve to the course he had now taken, came the probability that a thousand to one, in spite of all that he had written, by this time Jack had found friends and was in the way of soon being caught by new faces.

Times out of number when Robin was in pinafores, he had known Jack in love—furiously smitten, worked up to the white heat of passion, so that all his friends were betting on the fool he was about to make

of himself; and in the very thick of it all, some fine morning, everybody awoke to learn that Jack was gone—had left the place, nobody, his inamorata included, able to guess for where, or for what earthly reason. Everyone had some conjecture to hazard, but it never occurred to anyone, and certainly not to Mr. Veriker, to be within a mile of the truth, which generally was, that at a certain point of sliding Jack had suddenly pulled himself up, looked temptation in the face, and in the battle which ensued had come off so far conqueror that he had strength left to run away from his danger.

It was this habit that had stood him in good stead when he had made up his mind concerning Robin, with the difference that in place of striving to rid himself of every recollection, Jack carried away Robin's face

enshrined in his inmost heart. The knowledge that she loved him he treasured as a talisman to help him to get on, and to protect him from evil.

'Bless her! bless her!' he would say, pressing to his lips an old faded photograph taken in the early days when Robin wore short petticoats and her hair hung loose down her back. Below in crooked, cramped letters she had written then, 'Your own, your very own, Robin.'

'And so she is still!' Jack would tell himself triumphantly. 'I don't believe it has ever entered her head to give a single thought to any other man.'

The result of Jack's past made this certainty score a great deal for Robin, and then absence, occupation, a strange place, with not a creature he knew, all helped to fan a flame which, under other circumstances

or elsewhere, might by this time have flickered very low. Jack had always been a bad correspondent, and unless one wanted something or the other, during any of the times they had been apart, very few letters had passed between him and the Verikers. Now, much as he would have liked to write and hear from Robin, the same sense of honour which had closed his lips fettered his pen; to write to her the everyday commonplace letter of a friend was impossible, and by her silence he judged that she was under the same influence. But this feeling had nothing to do with Mr. Veriker, whom Jack anathematised from a free vocabulary as the most selfish, the laziest fellow the earth contained. Oh, if he only had him near! for words easy to say have an ugly look on paper, and Jack had to content himself by a somewhat curt epistle,

asking in straightforward English to be informed what they were about, where they were going, and what they were meaning to do, and it was this very letter which, reaching Mr. Veriker, had caused him such perplexity.

More than a week had gone by since he had received it, and so far nothing was done. Every morning he awoke with the determination to write to Jack, but the day passed and the night came, and he went to bed again not having done it.

Happily for his decision, it was at length in a way forced by a conversation with Christopher, in which he related with much satisfaction certain portions of a letter received by him that morning from his father. Mr. Blunt acknowledged himself very satisfied with the reports which had

been given him; he asked question after question regarding Robin, and he particularly desired, as he wished to see what she was like, that Christopher should bring back a photograph of her. There seemed no doubt, then, but that when she needed it—and a terrible conviction was forced on him that need it soon she would—a home with these relations would be offered her; and if so, Jack must be got rid of, put altogether off their scent—and the sooner it was done the better.

The following day Mr. Veriker excused himself from the afternoon expedition. Under the plea of lying down to get some rest he would secure the opportunity of writing Jack a letter.

The paper lay upon the table, the pen was in his hand, only the words to say were not ready.

The poor battered conscience which had slept undisturbedly through many a doubtful transaction was suddenly up in arms, and Mr. Veriker lacked all heart to quiet it.

Until now, it had not come to him how much he cared for Jack—valued his good opinion—enjoyed his fellowship ; and he was going to fling all these away, cut himself off from him altogether. Already his memory had travelled back to bygone days ; he was going through past scenes—remembering forgotten debts, old obligations. It was true that Jack had a habit of saying hard things, and at times made you feel a terribly rough tongue of his own, but for sticking to his word and never sneaking out of it if things went wrong, he hadn't his fellow.

The afternoon had slipped away, but Mr.

Veriker was but very little advanced with his letter, and yet it must be written; for Robin's sake he must make the sacrifice, it was the only amends he could make her. So with as much jauntiness as he could find expression for, he informed Jack that he felt wonderfully better, but not so well as he yet meant to be when they found a place with more sun, and fewer people from their own country.

'It's up stick, and away now from Venice; so until we find another resting-place you won't hear from us. I have the address you left to write to in case of necessity, but there's little fear but you will get some news of us before you move from where you're now hanging out.'

Then followed a rhodomontade respecting his health and his hopes of speedily getting quite well again, an invented message or two

from Robin, and he signed his name and it was finished.

Sealed and directed, he sat with it in his hand, with his eyes, looking straight before him, fixed on vacancy. Suddenly he buried his face in his arms. Even when alone men seek to hide their tears, and this treachery to Jack seemed the warrant of his own death —in casting him off he was giving up his last lingering hopes of life.

CHAPTER XII.

IT was Christopher's last evening in Venice; he was to start the next day, and he and Robin and Mr. Veriker were full of those promises, agreements, stipulations, which friends at parting make together.

Each had some confidence to impart, something particular to say—best said when only one was with the other; and, in consequence, a series of stratagems were resorted to, and kept up on Mr. Veriker's part to get rid of Robin, and in the case of

Robin and Christopher to get rid of Mr. Veriker. In this the two latter had just succeeded. Christopher wanted to have a last look of sunset from the public gardens, and he had asked Robin to go with him there.

'We won't include you,' he said to Mr. Veriker, 'because it might make you feel tired, and you and I will want to have our talk later.'

In the Via Garibaldi, as is usual, a crowd of loiterers were looking in at the shop-windows, before which neither Christopher nor Robin cared to linger. They walked briskly, talking of indifferent subjects until they reached the entrance of the gardens, which, except for a few old men and some women clustered together, were deserted.

'Shall we go to the end—to our fa-

vourite seat?' asked Robin, leading the way.

Christopher followed her—he was full of that dumb pain which hangs on our spirits and is a weight on our tongues; he wanted Robin to know how much he suffered at parting with her, and he could find no words in which to tell her.

The seat reached—a tumble-down affair backed by some thick feathery tamarisk trees—they sat down, and for some time, without speaking, watched the 'orb's departing glory.' Robin's thoughts ran on many things; Christopher's on one. Dare he venture to take her hand? almost fearing to meet her look, he took it. Startled, Robin turned quickly round, but only to smile at him encouragingly, and clasp the palm which trembled next her own. A lump of lead seemed to sink within

Christopher; with quick pressure he took his hand away. What a terrible jar to love is mere affection!

Jewelled with islands, there spread out before them, lay the golden sea, girt round with outlined chain of snowy peaks. The fishing-boats, with orange sails, were dotted here and there waiting for the wind, a gentle breeze of which already was being wafted from afar.

'Robin!' Christopher in desperation at length exclaimed, 'you'll think of me sometimes, won't you?'

Her thoughts had wandered off to Jack. It was he who had taught her to feel the beauty of a scene like this.

'Think of you! yes,' rousing herself, 'and very often too.'

'That's right'—how his sentences seemed jerked out to-night; his heart kept up such

a thudding that he had no breath to give his speech the measure it usually had. 'And whatever you want in any way you're to write to me—you remember that?'

'I'm not likely to forget,' and she smiled sadly, 'considering I have no one in the world who cares to be of use to me—but you.'

Should he tell her? It was madness, he knew, but yet, oh the sick longing that came into his heart! Involuntarily he shut his eyes, opening them to find Robin looking at him.

'The glare dazzles you,' she said.

Alas! instead of the despair which Jack would have called up to his aid, Christopher's face showed nothing but that his eyes were weak and filled with water.

'I ought not to look at the sun,' he said bitterly, and he put up his hand and

pressed his fingers tight, striving to keep back that torrent which was sapping all his strength.

Futile ! vain ! hopeless ! none knew better than himself, were any words which he might now say—Robin did not love him, in that never for a moment had he been deceived ; his deception lay in the belief that as yet she did not know love, and in the cherished hope that at some distant far-off day to come, it might be his to teach the lesson. And nurturing this hope, fed by a thousand specious arguments, Christopher would conjure up his own image, scan his appearance, examine into his advantages, trying to discover if he possessed one single merit that could prove a lure by which the heart he coveted might be caught. He too had a photograph of Robin to look at—the one lately taken at Vianelli's to show to his

father—and in his own room, when alone, he would take it from out its many coverings, and hold it before him, feasting his eyes. Fool! madman! that he was—ever to dream that she could be won by him.

For Robin, without possessing the gift of rare beauty, had a face which steals away men's hearts: there was in it a mixture of childlike innocence and daring sauciness—she could look tears and smile sunshine. Then her light-heartedness and gaiety of disposition, inherited from her father, were a species of subtle intoxication far removed from the effect of high spirits, which she did not possess, and which when not shared in makes companions sad. Robin had rather the art of adapting herself to every one's humour, and while doing so the power of gradually imparting to them her own.

The opportunity of making girl-friends

had never been given her. Mr. Veriker had kept aloof from the society of women; it was a tribute to the love in which he held his wife's memory, that, being in the prime of life and very handsome, he pointedly avoided seeking any feminine intimacy. Those who had the hardihood to disregard this avoidance and to thrust themselves on him, he protected his daughter from, and—as whenever Jack was with them he had a worthy coadjutor in him—the world of women was a terra incognita to Robin. Was it from this reason that she was so utterly devoid of the small—the petty—weaknesses common to many of her sex? She knew that she was pretty, and openly showed the pleasure she took in the fact; but of vanity—in its true meaning—she had none. Candid, frank, open, the girl with good training might have been perfect; as

it was, left to run wild with no pruning, she lacked many of those moral conditions without which no character can be duly balanced.

It must not be supposed that Christopher was blind to the faults he saw in her, neither could he turn a deaf ear to some things which pained him inexpressibly. Careful as Mr. Veriker strove to be, and anxious as he was to appear at his best before Christopher, as a fig tree cannot bring forth thistles, nor a grape thorns, neither can a man whose morality is easy call up virtues to assume at will. Mr. Veriker would talk of doubtful people to Robin; tell stories before her, at which Christopher—who had given her wings—would feel his hair stand on end, and—severest shock of all—his angel would supply names, jog her father's memory, and help out his recollections.

When Jack was with them Robin suffered from many a sharp rebuke from him, and had often been told to hold her tongue; but much as it pained Christopher, he felt powerless to speak—the evil seemed rooted so much deeper down to him. It had its origin in the life she led, the places she saw; and apart from his love, he was possessed by a great longing to rescue her from this, to guide her by a teaching of which she knew nothing; for of many truths, the heathen in a savage land had as much knowledge as poor Robin. And the same compassion—although in a lesser degree—he spread out towards Mr. Veriker, with whom Christopher never talked without realising how impotent words are when, to those we say them to, they bear no meaning.

Mr. Veriker's sole anxiety as to death was that he had to leave Robin. 'I'm afraid

I must make up my mind to throw up my hand,' he would say, 'and there, so far as I've found out, will be an end of the game —and of me.' Then, seeing that Christopher looked pained, he would add by way of consolation, 'You talk to Robin about that, my good fellow; make her listen to what you've been telling me—women are ever so much easier to convince about that sort of thing than men are.'

It never seemed to present itself to Mr. Veriker that Christopher was a man—most certainly he never regarded him as one; he rather looked on him as some strange anomaly, some unaccountable being, possessing a pot of money, and not an idea of enjoying it!—except in spending it on him and Robin, and that certainly he had done freely enough since he had been there; he was never tired of bringing them gifts,

anticipating their wishes, providing them with pleasures. They had lived as much as was possible *en prince* since Christopher had come to Venice.

Alluding to something which she was to do—in the conversation which ensued that evening in the public gardens—Robin said:

'But we shall have to draw in our horns when you are gone: we couldn't afford to do by ourselves what we have done while you have been with us.'

'Afford!' said Christopher reprovingly; 'why do you pain me by making me repeat the same thing again and again to you, Robin? What good is there in calling myself your brother, if you will not give me the privileges of one?'

Either his tone or manner seemed to trouble her; she shot a quick glance at him.

'Give!' she said, with a half smile and shake of her head; 'you have done nothing else but give from the first minute we saw you. I don't know how we shall ever repay you, Christopher.'

'By consenting to come to England, you could.'

And give up Jack for ever! That was what her sigh meant.

'It's not possible?' he asked anxiously, looking at her; 'you wouldn't like it?' The little sigh had not escaped his ear.

'Oh, I don't think I should mind. The question is, how would our fathers agree?'

With the knowledge he had of Mr. Veriker's health, Christopher hardly knew what to reply. Mr. Blunt had at all times an ungovernable temper, and he regarded it a privilege of his prosperity that he was not called upon to restrain himself for anyone.

At any moment an outburst of passion might be fatal to Mr. Veriker; and the two men together, how soon cause might be given for that to come, no one who knew them both could say.

'Agree?' he said, as if he had been considering the matter; 'perhaps better now that they are both older.'

Robin smiled.

'I don't know that—age seldom improves tempers, I fancy.'

'I am sure you would get on with my father,' Christopher began.

'You think so—I wonder, should I?'

'Yes; I am sure you would, and with everybody about too, and that is why he wants to know the neighbours better than we do.'

'Would there be girls among the neighbours to know?'

'Some there are.'

'Nice girls?'

'I think so.'

'Pretty?'

'I believe they are thought so.'

'Haven't you seen them, then?'

'Many times I've seen them.'

'And yet don't know what they are to look at, whether they are pretty or not.' Robin laughed softly: 'When they ask you about me, Christopher, what are you going to say?'

'They won't ask me,' he stammered.

Oh! if she could but read his thoughts, and learn from them what he wanted to say.

'But your father will ask you?'

'I have your photograph to show.'

'And you think that does me justice?' and the look of mischief she turned on him was beyond the art of photography to

portray. 'Oh, Christopher, you are not given to flattery, that I must say.'

'Would you like me to flatter you?' he managed to ask.

'No, I should like you to tell me the truth,' and she smiled saucily.

'The truth, Robin,' he said, and his voice almost died away.

Was it the return of that vague fear which made her interrupt him, and quickly cry:

'But I am wasting our last evening in nonsense, forgetting how far away this time to-morrow you will be, and the hundred things I shall remember then that I have forgotten to say to you now.'

'Never mind,' and Christopher drew a long breath, 'what you forget'—his decision was taken: he wouldn't risk a longer stay —'if you will keep your promise not to forget me.'

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. VERIKER was the victim of two states of feeling. When he was tolerably well, and the chances seemed remote as to when it might occur, he could—to anyone but Robin—talk of his death as probably near. The instant any cause brought back symptoms he had been told to fear, though his life had depended on it, he could not have approached the subject. The very thought that anyone about him suspected his dread was sufficient to aggravate his pain and

distress his breathing. Unconsciously the prompting of many things he had to say to Christopher was the supposition that they might never meet again, and the continued repetition of the thought became oppressive to him—it acted on his nerves and made them sensitive and irritable.

While Robin and Christopher were absent at the gardens, he had been annoyed by some trifling incident which had gone wrong in the hotel. At another time he would have passed it over; now he believed it had been done purposely to aggravate him. He tried to make light of it on their return, and Robin, skilled in the art of soothing disaster, hoped when they set off to dine that he had got over it. The dinner—as is often the case when no one feels particularly cheerful, and everyone is bent on seeming so—was rather a dull affair. Another party had

secured Erasmo, and the waiter they had was a fresh man who did not know anything about them; the dishes were ill-made, had been kept waiting; the wine 'nothing like what they had usually,' did not go well with them. Like most brilliant, fascinating people, when Mr. Veriker was disposed to find fault, nothing satisfied him.

'I don't think he is well,' said Robin in an undertone to Christopher. They had finished their dinner, and were crossing over to Florian's for coffee and ices. 'You ask him how he feels—he does not like me to notice him.'

'Feel all right?' said Christopher, with pointed inquiry—they had found a table and were waiting for chairs.

'Right!'—Mr. Veriker's tone implied what in heaven's name should make any one ask him if he felt right—'as a trivet,' he said;

'that is, as right as any one can feel who has had to eat the most abominable dinner ever served to mortal man. Whew!' he said, in a voice which scared the very senses out of a flower-girl, and an urchin with matches who had come up close, in prospect of a customer; 'I should like to have on the end of a fork the heart of the wretch who cooked it.'

'Papa, you have scarified those two poor creatures. Hist!—Hist!—come here,' she called in Italian. 'Christopher, buy something of them—I'll pick you out a button-hole. Which do you like, pink or red? Oh! here's some orange-blossom—you'll have that, won't you?'

'What does it mean?' Christopher asked.

'Oh, nothing that you need be afraid of; on the contrary, you will be for ever safe

from me; you never marry the person to whom you give orange-blossom.'

She had taken hold of his coat—the little bouquet was in her hand; Christopher snatched it from her and threw it again into the basket.

'Give me a pink one,' he said; 'that oleander will do.'

'And not the orange-blossom? Oh, well, I will have it myself, then!'

'I won't pay for it if you do.'

'How disgustingly mean of you! Papa, give me some money; I haven't any, and Christopher won't buy a bouquet for me.'

'I haven't got any,' said Mr. Veriker; 'since Christopher has been with us I haven't carried any, on principle.'

Robin turned and said something in Italian to the girl.

'She'll trust me, she says.'

'All right,' replied Christopher, 'let her; I don't care how you get it, as long as you can't say I gave it to you.'

This little episode, which at another time would have provoked Mr. Veriker's good-humour, only now increased his discontent.

'What is the good,' he thought, 'of his plucking up courage now? That's the sort of thing he ought to have begun a week ago, not have waited until just as he is on the verge of starting. I'm sure he has had opportunities enough, but he has made nothing of them. If that had been Jack, now—pshaw!'

Mr. Veriker's imagination failed him to think to what point, under similar circumstances, Jack would have reached by this time. Since the departure of that letter his regrets for the friend he had cast himself off from had been never-ending. With

no hope of their meeting again, Jack had been exalted to a height of perfection he had never attained before; and whenever —and of late he had very frequently done so—he compared him with Christopher, Mr. Veriker was disposed to consider that in his daughter's interest he had made himself a martyr.

'We none of us want to be late to-night, do we?' said Robin, interrupting this reverie of her father's.

'I don't,' he said; 'but I suppose you and Christopher will want to go off presently and have your stroll by the water. Hist!' he called to a man in the distance with newspapers, 'which of those fellows is it—can you see, Robin? Not that it much matters. I don't expect one of them has got a *Figaro*.'

'If not, we'll go and try and get you one.'

'Rubbish, child, get me one! if I can't have the *Figaro*, I shall do well enough with something else. Be off, the two of you, and have your walk, and then there'll be some chance of getting home in decent time to-night.'

Robin looked at him uneasily; all the old signs of worry had come back: he sighed, stretched himself out, altered his position restlessly, pushed back anything that happened to be near, moved his chair if people came close to him.

'We're not thinking of going to-night,' she began. 'Christopher and I have said all we want to say to each other. We want to be all three together for the last time, don't we, Christopher?'

'Yes,' said Christopher.

Oppressed, perhaps, by the compliment paid him, Mr. Veriker suddenly shifted him-

self on his seat, a chair near him lost its balance, and in its fall knocked against the arm of a waiter, who attending to anything but the tray of glasses he carelessly held, down they went with a clatter which made everybody near jump up, thus affording an opportunity for Mr. Veriker to rid himself of the burst of expletives that were boiling over against Christopher.

This threatening of the old trouble which for more than a month now had seemed gone for ever, had brought back all his anxiety about Robin's future. He wanted to feel assured that it was securely settled, and he was seized on by the idea that this would be done if Christopher spoke to her. In a conversation of a few nights before, the subject had been lightly touched on between them; but at that time Mr. Veriker, in capital spirits—after a pleasant day and an

pher was much occupied with all he meant to say—the matter of his speech and how he should best arrange his words made him thoughtful and absent. That he was able to keep under that pain of parting, and to think of others rather than himself, was but in keeping with his character. Robin, more than usually anxious, spoke only by fits and starts, the wrong twist which everything that evening had taken seemed to have upset her.

Mr. Veriker seizing on any occasion to find fault, declared, rising, that he couldn't stand the two of them any longer.

'Mutes at a funeral would be cheerful to you,' he said; 'we'd best go in—another hour of this sort of thing,' and he gave a most obtrusive shiver, 'would make me ready to throw myself into the canal yonder.'

Robin jumped up; Christopher followed.

'You're anxious, I'm afraid,' he said softly.

'A little—I was hoping it was all past and gone—he seemed so much better.'

'So I hope he will be again to-morrow.'

'I am so sorry you are going, Christopher.'

Because she was speaking in a whisper, to emphasise her words, she stretched out her hand towards him. He took it—the little warm palm lay next to his—why should he not carry it to his lips and cover it with kisses—kisses that must surely tell her what he was longing to utter. No, no; there were so many people about, near enough to see, and close enough to listen to them—it would never do—so he only tightened his hold of her hand as he said, bending down:

'Sorry are you, Robin—tell me—why?'

'Because he has been so well ever since you came here,' she answered simply.

Did the girl guess the pain she was giving? Was it the desire to wound which made her answer so?

Love is very cruel to love, and the heart which has given itself to another is often hedged about by thorns ready to make all who come too near bleed and suffer.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE next day Christopher left Venice. He started at an early hour before the morning haze had cleared away, and by the time the train reached the end of that long bridge which crosses the Lagune, every trace of the city behind him had vanished.

Fortunately, as he considered it, he had the carriage to himself, and could move about as he pleased, and do as he liked without disturbing any one. He had said good-bye to Mr. Veriker at the hotel; had

parted with Robin at the railway station; and as the line of towers and spires on which his eyes remained fixed became faint, obscured, and now blotted out altogether, he asked, Was it all a dream, a vision that had passed away and was over? Should he wake up presently to find himself the Christopher he had been—aimless, purposeless, with no settled interest in life—the round man in the square hole? No, thank God! that was not likely, whatever might come of this visit, and the presentiment was strong in him that the result would be more of pain than of pleasure, it had had the effect of lifting him out of himself—had tried his strength, tested his capabilities, made him know how little he could do, and alas! feel how much he could suffer.

There had been very few words exchanged

between him and Robin that morning, and certainly not a whisper of love had passed between them, and yet Christopher felt she was nearer to him, that in some way she had herself drawn closer. Would the words Mr. Veriker had said come to pass? Was it true that sometimes not until the hour of parting was love discovered? Christopher would not cheat himself so far as that, but the tremulous allusions to good-byes, the regretful eyes that looked farewell, lit up within his breast the torch of hope.

'In time, in time,' a voice within went singing. Nurtured by tenderness, strengthened by devotion, might not the tiny germ spread out into fair blossom yet? Christopher's heart swelled at the bare supposition—the craving for love had grown so strong in him that he caught at, and clung to, each straw of promise, finding great comfort in the fact

of Robin's youth, her jesting talk and utter disbelief in love, and in all that was advanced in proof of man's devotion. That showed—so Christopher argued—that her heart was yet untouched: she could not jest at scars if she had felt a wound, and in all the conversations he had had with her and her father, there had never been a mention made of any one whom by any possibility he could turn into a rival. Mr. Veriker—as well as Robin—had been very frank in all he had told him about their past life, describing, with that happy knack he had, their surroundings and associates, so that for the time Christopher saw both the place and the people.

It had so happened that during the journey to the railway station, notwithstanding it was his last morning with Robin, at least for some time—and how often for

some time means for ever—Christopher's thoughts ran mostly on Mr. Veriker. Perhaps Robin guessed as much, for, unlike her usual self—pouring out hopes and fears—she sat either silent or making some trivial remark, but without an allusion to her father, and yet she had seen him, had gone up to his room to ask if he was not coming down to say good-bye to Christopher, as the night before he had announced he meant to do.

On the previous evening when they got back to the hotel, Christopher was prepared for some final communications which they had long spoken of having; but though to afford the opportunity Robin left them undisturbed, Mr. Veriker had apparently nothing to say: at least, he said nothing, until Christopher broached the conversation, when suddenly jumping up, he declared he

must go at once off to bed—he was tired out, could not talk then if the whole universe depended on it. 'Yes, yes,' he knew, he hadn't forgotten what he wanted to say, but it must be said to-morrow, he'd get up early, and see Christopher off; there would be time enough before he started for both of them to have a talk, and say all they wanted to say to each other. So in expectation of his making his appearance, Christopher had tranquilly waited, until the hour for departure drew so dangerously near that Robin volunteered to run up to her father's room, and see if she could not hurry his movements.

'Christopher!' she called, 'Christopher! you are to come up here: he is not going to the station, he is not well this morning.'

Conversant by this time with the self-indulgent habits of Mr. Veriker, and his

rooted dislike to early rising, Christopher was beginning to twit him, when at sight of the altered face, pinched and pain-drawn, he stopped, Since the first dawn of early day, when—awakening from unrefreshing sleep—Mr. Veriker had remembered that Christopher was going, he had been screwing up courage to send for him. Now that he had put it off until there was but a moment or so to spare, he could only feebly grasp the hand put into his without having strength to utter a word, but the look he gave, oh, how it haunted Christopher—he could not rid himself of it, it seemed to come between him and everything he turned his eyes upon; and if for a moment his thoughts went off elsewhere, the memory of that drawn face and those despairing eyes beckoned them back, and stirred him with new regrets.

It was quite a relief to him that Robin did not question him, and that when he came down they had to hurry off to the steps, making no remark to each other but such as related to the things he had to carry and how pressed he was for time. He hardly dare look at her, fearing she should discover the trouble in his face—trouble which sprang from reproach, that he had made so little of his opportunities in trying to influence the poor fellow he had just left.

To a serious contemplative mind like Christopher's, there had always been something very terrible in the flippancy displayed by Mr. Veriker regarding his state—to be judged leniently because he could but acknowledge the magic that that gay humour exercised upon himself, so completely carrying him away that at moments

when he had resolved to be most earnest, his gravest thoughts had been swept off in its whirlwind of fun and frolic.

Up to the previous evening he had hardly realised that a frown could abide on that smiling face, or that ill-temper could more than brush past that careless genial disposition. Now—this morning—another door had been unlocked for him, and without a word of warning the skeleton which hitherto Mr. Veriker had hidden out of sight had been shown to him.

There were no doubts now in Christopher's mind as to the reasons which had prompted that first letter—it had not only been written by a dying man, but by a man who knew that he was dying; and recalling the jests made over doctors' mistakes, the laughter indulged in at their cautions and croaking, Christopher was filled with unutter-

able sadness, for he saw plainly now that all this talk was but a subterfuge to conceal the dread reality.

'Can it have anything to do with your going away?' Robin said abruptly.

They had reached the station, she and Christopher were standing on the platform together, and his thoughts had travelled back to the short time since, when on that very spot, the two had stood side by side, strangers to one another.

He looked at her questioningly, his ear had not quite caught what she said—they had not been speaking of Mr. Veriker.

'You thought he looked ill, didn't you, this morning?'

'I did not think he seemed at all well last night,' Christopher answered evasively.

Robin took hold of his hand and held it tightly in her own; she said nothing,

but her face, half averted from Christopher, told him the distress she was controlling.

'But you know,' he said soothingly, 'that I am very often ill myself.'

'Yes?' and she drew nearer, as if finding sympathy.

'Don't you remember my telling you that at home for weeks together, at times, I am not well?'

'And yet you get all right again?'

'As you see.'

A smile came into her face.

'Oh, Christopher!' and in the sigh she gave she seemed to find relief, 'why must you go? Why can't you stay?'

'Ah!' he said, getting into the carriage, for the train was on the point of starting, and, like many another one, just as he was going he felt his courage come, 'if I could

but think you felt so sorry to part with me, as I do to say good-bye to you.'

Was it fear of the carriage moving that made her suddenly draw back? Perhaps having to raise it gave her voice that altered tone.

'I don't take it as a good-bye,' she said, 'but as *au revoir.*'

'What does that mean, that you are coming to us, or am I to return to you?'

'Which would you like?'

'Either — both — anything — everything —that would keep me with you.'

The desire to say the words, and the fear of saying them—for it seemed as if his meaning must be heard in each syllable—made everything before Christopher's eyes dance to and fro; the carriage gave a jerk which sent him forward and back, there was a shrill whistle which made him start up to

exchange one more look with Robin, and they were off—the train was moving, he had lost sight of her, and very soon strain to the utmost his eyes—as he did—they no longer saw anything that could be called Venice.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. BLUNT had proposed that his son should diversify his journey back from Venice, instead of which, Christopher had written to say he was coming home direct. A telegram from Paris would announce the day and hour of his arrival.

Now that he had left the Verikers, he was all anxiety to see his father, and accustomed to reproach himself with want of tact in his usual management of him, most of his thoughts ran on how he could act so as best to serve his friends.

Unfortunately for Christopher he had to struggle against a terribly sensitive nature, of which his father had never been able to form the slightest comprehension. Blessed with robust health and great bodily strength, that inherent delicacy of constitution which gave his son nerves and a dozen unexplained ailments, was a mystery to Mr. Blunt; one which he tried to solve by every remedy in which he had any curing faith. 'Let him get up and eat a good breakfast'—'Take a ten-mile walk'—'Put a bottle of good wine into him,' these were Mr. Blunt's prescriptions, and after more than twenty years of failure, he still went on repeating them.

With the one exception of his late wife, to whom he had most discovered his feelings, not a living soul had an idea of the sort of idolatry in which Mr. Blunt held Christopher—not *that* Christopher, with whom as

Unfortunately for Christopher he had to struggle against a terribly sensitive nature, of which his father had never been able to form the slightest comprehension. Blessed with robust health and great bodily strength, that inherent delicacy of constitution which gave his son nerves and a dozen unexplained ailments, was a mystery to Mr. Blunt; one which he tried to solve by every remedy in which he had any curing faith. 'Let him get up and eat a good breakfast'—'Take a ten-mile walk'—'Put a bottle of good wine into him,' these were Mr. Blunt's prescriptions, and after more than twenty years of [illegible] still went on repeating them.

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whom as

an individual he had no sympathy, felt no companionship, had not a taste in common—but that fruit of his body, who bore his name and would inherit his money. Why, it was to make him a gentleman that he had toiled and laboured—on his account that he lived hedged in by surroundings from which he drew neither comfort nor enjoyment.

While Mrs. Blunt had lived, her good sense and influence had prevented the outburst of display in which her husband had since indulged. Sensible of his social defects, she had taken care to arrange their household with a due regard to hide them; but another rule had sway now, and Mr. Blunt sat at his meals in solemn state, with a magnificent footman behind his chair, and the eye of a solemn butler fixed on him.

What a curse to many a self-made man are those small niceties of behaviour, so difficult of practice to those who have not been early trained in them—that, 'Oh, beg pardon, sir, thought perhaps I hadn't placed you a fork,' was sufficient—feeling his knife was in his mouth—to upset Mr. Blunt's appetite for the most tempting dishes. 'This glass, sir, for hock, sir,' and the wine had no more flavour than water.

Why didn't Christopher get married? That was what Mr. Blunt wanted, then he could come and go when he liked, have a home in the country and a little place in London, where with a few companions of bygone days he could eat as he pleased, drink as he liked, talk, make merry, cut jokes, and enjoy himself. But to get married, you must go out and seek a wife, for though persuaded,

as he was, that not a girl in Wadpole or the country round but would snap at being Mrs. Christopher Blunt—his son's wife; yet it was expecting too much, that in the first instance they should all come running after him.

'We want somebody here to look after us,' he would say, if at any time chance brought a young lady in his way.

'I'm not speaking for myself; I'm too old to try a number three, but my son Christopher, there——' and he would look at his son, thinking he had made an opportunity for him; but Christopher would take no notice, and worse still he would take no notice of the lady.

'I don't know what's come to young chaps nowadays,' Mr. Blunt had said. 'You haven't none o' you got what I call the making of men about you—don't think of sweet-

heartin', nor nothing o' that kind, it seems to me.'

'Oh, there's time enough for me yet,' Christopher would reply pacifically.

'Time enough for you! and what about me, I should like to know; ain't I to see those that's coming after me. It don't seem so very much for a father to ask of his son to take a wife, so that he may have his grandchildren round about his knee.'

That was Mr. Blunt's desire, the wish which had taken possession of his life, to see his grandchildren—to be able to look beyond Christopher and make sure that, come what might, there would be those belonging to him to have what he must leave behind. The knowledge that his son was delicate—although to himself he refused to admit that such was the case—but added to his anxiety, and a chief motive

in letting him go to see Mr. Veriker had been that it would shake him up a bit—take him out of leading-strings—make him more of a man than he was now.

Mr. Blunt could better have excused a life of excess than the one of unostentatious retirement towards which Christopher was disposed.

Between father and son a constant struggle went on: the one pushing forward, the other as resolutely holding back.

Mr. Blunt would have had Christopher attend every ball and meeting, far and near; he wanted him to put his name down for every club in the county.

Christopher, on the other hand, could hardly be induced to pay a call, and if he saw certain of his neighbours coming, he would go a mile out of his way to avoid them. That love of display in which Mr.

Blunt delighted was torture to his son—to be thrust into notice because of their equipage and fine liveries humiliated him.

There was but one man in Wadpole with whom he was sufficiently intimate to call him a friend, and he, to his father's disgust, was a newcomer and the curate.

'You haven't no spirit in you,' Mr. Blunt would say; 'instead of trying to get in with those that could be of some use to you. What's the good of a fellow like that?'

It was not that he had any especial dislike to Mr. Cameron, but he wanted to have his vanity ministered to by seeing Christopher mix with those in whose company he himself could never feel at ease. When his son was on horseback, Mr. Blunt was riding; in whatever he did the father had a share, and followed with pride that portion of himself

which had always been well fed and clothed and nursed in luxury. The greater half of much ambition has root in a similar selfish prompting.

During the time Christopher had been in Venice, Mr. Blunt had been taking his pleasure in London, thoroughly enjoying the fellowship of some of his old companions, indemnifying his apparent forgetfulness of them in the country by the generous treatment he gave them in town.

The letter announcing that Christopher was returning had sent him back to Wadpole, and a telegram a few days later on, saying the hour to expect him, took Mr. Blunt off to the station.

Few things put him in better humour than a drive through the little town of Wadpole—a sleepy, out-of-the-world, old-fashioned place which, though but a short

distance from London, seemed, so far as progress went, to have been overlooked or forgotten.

There was one main street, composed of substantial dwelling-houses mixed up with shops kept by well-to-do folk, who with their business inherited their customers, and on market-days when the country people came in and the farmers were about, there was a little show of bustle here; but at ordinary times the noise of carriage-wheels brought people to the doors and windows, and Mr. Blunt was greeted with the obsequious salutations due to such horses and such liveries.

'That was something like! something worth looking at; a man who'd got the money and knew how to spend it—and spent it among them too, which was more than Mr. Chandos did'—their own Squire—

a very unpopular man, who seldom of late years had cared to do more than pay a visit to Wadpole.

However much the neighbouring gentry might give the cold shoulder to Mr. Blunt, in Wadpole itself he had secured the popularity usually awarded to one whose advent is heralded by fabulous wealth, wonderful speculations, and an enviable facility of turning all he touched into money.

No one could exactly tell how, but there was a general belief that Mr. Blunt's coming meant some good to the town, and various hints were given and reports exchanged, as down the whole length of the street they watched him out of sight.

Then the coachman permitted the horses to slacken their pace; they had but to cross the wooden bridge, mount the short, steep hill, and the station would be reached.

No longer satisfied with the pent-house shelter, which up to now had served well enough, public spirit—aided by a handsome subscription from Mr. Blunt—had demanded a proper waiting-room, which was now in course of erection, together with the offices which should form a respectable terminus.

None of these being yet fully finished, Mr. Blunt remained seated in his carriage, an object of admiration to the few persons waiting about; none of whom being of sufficient importance to engage in conversation, his attention was caught by some workmen occupied—and very busily too, since the great man had drawn near—in completing the masonry of a boundary-wall. A mischance had caused the train to be late, and as the time went on Mr. Blunt became more and more engrossed in the work he was watching.

Country fellows who had learnt their trade in the little town near to which they had been born, how clumsily they managed their tools! If it was in that slipshod way the work was to be done, the whole thing would be down—in pieces about their ears—before a year was out.

There was one man who particularly stirred his wrath, a happy-go-lucky lout who kept time in the dabbing-in of his mortar to some doleful composition which he slowly whistled.

Oh, the purgatory of having to look on and to sit still!

At that moment Mr. Blunt would not have grudged a good sum to be able to jump from the carriage, pull off his coat, and knocking the whole five bumpkins to the right-about, give them a sight of what well-done, proper work ought to look like.

He had not forgotten his tools, or how to handle them either.

Did anyone suppose that if he had ever scamped his work in that fashion he should be where he was now? and before his eyes there rose up a poor boy carrying a mason's hod on his shoulder.

In an instant Mr. Blunt's rubicund face had turned crimson; it was as if he felt that others must have seen that vision, and have recognised that long ago he was that boy.

Casting his eyes sharply round, he fancied he detected a snigger on those stolid faces near, that they exchanged meaning looks, guessed perhaps why he was interested in the progress of that wall.

'What, I should like to know, is the meaning of all this delay?'

Mr. Blunt's comely appearance was as ruffled as an angry turkey-cock's.

'Where's the station-master? Oh, Mr. Watkins, there you are.'

'It's a little hitch with the Bocking train, sir,' said Watkins, coming forward; 'they got stuck fast by Greentree, but it's all right now—they've signalled us past—they'll soon be here. I was waiting to tell you, but I see you was noting how they was getting on here—slow work it seems to me.'

Torn between the desire to point out the defects of the work and the fear of displaying too much knowledge of it, Mr. Blunt hesitated, when fortunately a diversion occurred in the shape of a new arrival: a high sort of butcher's cart with a rough pony, driven by a bright-looking girl, dashed up to the station.

'Am I in time?' she said, standing up so as to look on the platform over Mr. Blunt.

'Down train not in yet? that is good! Watkins,' to the station-master, 'come here; I want a parcel sent. How d'ye do, Mr. Blunt? I was so afraid I shouldn't do it;' and as she looked at her watch she gave a nod of satisfaction. Then in a graver tone, seeming to address all who were near, she said, 'You will be sorry, I am sure, to hear that the Squire has been taken ill—the rector had no idea that it was anything serious when he went to London, but the account yesterday was so unfavourable that he has determined to go on to Brighton from there; and these are some things, Watkins, I want taken up to meet him at Victoria Station. Lambert will be able to manage it for me, don't you think?'

'If it's anything for you, Miss Georgy, he'll do it if it's to be done,' said Watkins heartily.

'Of course he will,' and the girl's face reflected the smiles turned towards her; 'it's of no use having friends unless one makes use of them, is it, Mr. Blunt?' and without waiting his answer she asked, 'Are you here to meet your son? I heard he was expected to-day.'

'Yes; I fancy he must be in a hurry to get home. I wanted him to take it easy and stay by the way, but he's come straight back from Italy. I'm sorry to hear this about Mr. Chandos, though. Is it sudden, or anything he's subject to?'

'Papa does not say, but he evidently thinks seriously of it, and the rector isn't one to look at the dark side of things, you know.'

While speaking, she had jumped down unassisted, and stood looking about for some one to entrust her pony to.

'Shall I—would you like my footman?' Mr. Blunt hesitated. His footman had but recently come from the service of an earl. Dare he venture to ask him to descend thus far?

'Thanks; oh, dear no. Stop where you are,' she said, taking it for granted the man intended at once acting on his master's suggestion. 'I see somebody who has been looking out for me,' and she nodded affirmatively to an old fellow who, at a little distance off, stood pulling his forelock in anticipation.

'I shall go on to the platform,' she said, 'and interview Lambert myself.'

Mr. Blunt had already got down from the carriage with the gallant idea of being able to assist her.

'I don't think I can do better than follow your example,' he said. 'The train must be close at hand by this time.'

So going round and through the wicket they went chatting one to the other, and when a few minutes later the engine came puffing in, Christopher, looking out of the carriage window, was greeted by his father and Miss Georgy Temple standing side by side together.

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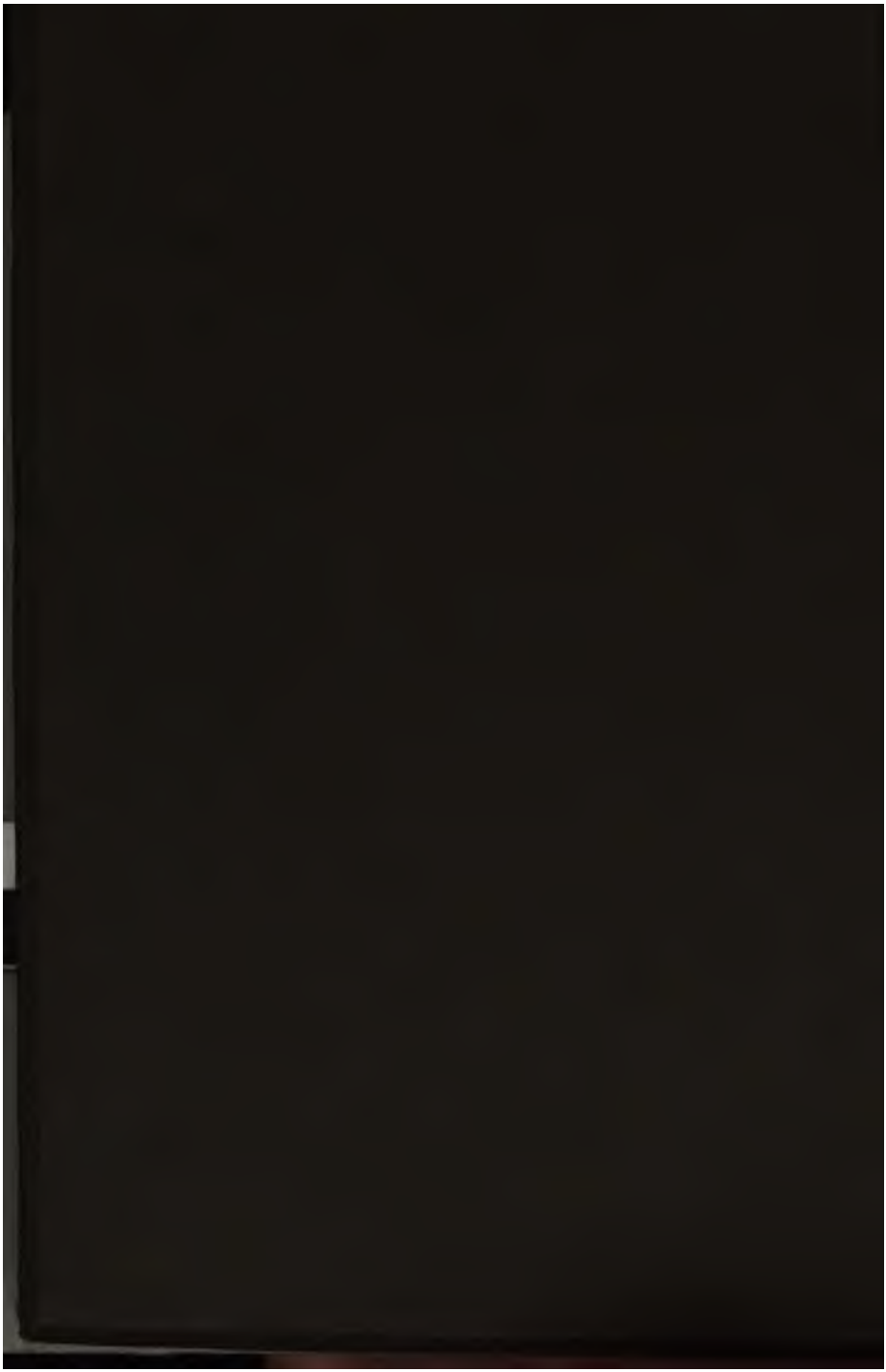
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